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POLITICS

## Mandela Inspired a Generation of Activists, Including Obama

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Nelson Mandela inspired many people around the world to devote their lives to political activism and human rights. In the United States, just as John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez aroused the baby boomers to become activists during the 1960s, Mandela and the anti-apartheid movement inspired the generation that came of age in the 1980s. They include many of today's labor organizers, community and environmental activists, and human rights advocates, now in their 40s and early 50s whose first protest activities were part of the crusade to free Mandel from prison and dismantle South Africa's apartheid system.

One of them was a sophomore at Occidental College whom fellow students knew as Barry Obama.

"Over 30 years ago, while still a student, I learned of Nelson Mandela and the struggles in this beautiful land. It stirred something in me," Obama said during his speech at Mandela's memorial service in Johannesburg.

This was not the first time that Obama had expressed debt to Mandela.

Last week upon hearing about Mandela's death, Obama recalled how deeply the South African leader had influenced him.

"I would study his words and his writings. The day he was released from prison gave me a sense of what human beings can do when they're guided by their hopes and not by their fears. And like so many around the globe, I cannot fully imagine my own life without the example that Nelson Mandela set."

"My first act of political activism was when I was at Occidental College," Obama explained last June when he traveled to Africa but was unable to visit Mandela, who was severely ill at the time. "As a 19 year-old, I got involved in the anti-apartheid movement back in 1979, 1980, because I was inspired by what was taking place in South Africa."

The anti-apartheid divestment protest at Occidental was one of the most formative moments of his life. It was the beginning of a trajectory that led him from student, to community organizer, to law professor, to politician and eventually to the White House.

In his 1995 autobiography, *Dreams From My Father*, Obama wrote about his early activism.

"I got involved in the divestment campaign," he recalled, explaining that "I found myself drawn into a larger role -- contacting representatives of the African National Congress to speak on campus, drafting letters to the faculty, printing up flyers, arguing strategy." As he got more involved, "I noticed that people had begun to listen to my opinions," and he was asked to speak at a rally outside a meeting of Occidental's trustees.

In February 1981, Obama was the opening speaker at a rally on the Occidental campus protesting the college's investments in corporations that did business in South Africa.

"There's a struggle doing on," Obama began, according to his memoir. "It's happening an ocean away. But it's a struggle that touches each and every one of us. Whether we know it or not. A struggle that demands we choose sides. Not between black and white. Not between rich and poor. No -- it's a harder choice than that. It's a choice between dignity and servitude. Between fairness and injustice. Between commitment and indifference. A choice between right and wrong."

One of Obama's classmates, Margot Mifflin, recalled (in the *New Yorker* last year) that Obama also said: "We call this rally today to bring attention to Occidental's investment in South Africa."

It was Obama's first public speech, but he didn't speak for very long. Obama and his activist friends had orchestrated the event so that soon after he began speaking, two white students dressed in paramilitary uniforms, pretending to be Afrikaners (the key defenders of South Africa's apartheid regime), came on stage and dragged him away, a gambit Obama described in his memoir as "street theater."

Obama's initial activism piqued his curiosity about Mandela, who was then in prison for his leadership of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement.

"I think at that time I didn't necessarily imagine that Nelson Mandela might be released," Obama said at his press conference in Senegal last June, "but I had read his writings and his speeches, and I understood that this was somebody who believed in

that basic principle I just talked about -- treating people equally -- and was willing to sacrifice his life for that belief."

During the 1980s, the campus anti-apartheid campaign escalated. For many students, like Obama, it represented their first act of political commitment. They erected shanties on campuses (symbolizing the oppression and miserable living conditions of South Africa's black population), organized teach-ins to educate students about the issues, and engaged in civil disobedience at South African embassies.

But the most widespread and influential strategy involved divestment.

By the mid-1980s, 155 colleges and universities had divested from companies doing business in South Africa. A movement milestone occurred in July 1986, when the University of California Board of Regents voted to sell all \$3.1 billion of its stock in such corporations. In addition, 26 state governments, 22 counties, and 90 cities, including some of the nation's biggest, removed their money from multinational firms that did business in South Africa.

But Occidental College was not one of those institutions. Activists there founded the Student Committee Against Apartheid in 1978, a year before Obama arrived at Occidental from Hawaii. The Board of Trustees soon expressed its opposition to the college acting "as an agent of social change." Faculty and students (including the future president, who spent two years at the Occidental before transferring to Columbia in the fall of 1981) persisted in their protests, organizing rallies and teach-ins, and erecting shantytowns on the quad. A unanimous faculty vote called for divestment.

In 1985, to co-opt the protest, Occidental President Richard Gilman invited Zulu chief Gatsha Buthelezi (who opposed the African National Congress, the major anti-apartheid movement, whose leader, Mandela, was still in prison) to visit the campus. His talk didn't persuade the students to stop their divestment protests, but the college trustees continued to resist their demands. In 1986, students asked the college to review its investments in five corporations with business ties to South Africa, one of which (Avery Corporation) was headed by an Occidental trustee. The following year, the trustees rejected a student petition to sell its stock in those companies.

In 1988, Occidental hired John Slaughter, an African-American engineer and former head of the National Science Foundation, as its new president. In May 1990, the college brought Bishop Desmond Tutu, a pro-ANC religious leader and an outspoken advocate of divestment, to speak on campus. But the next month - long after many other institutions had bowed to student pressure -- the Occidental Board of Trustees, dominated by business executives, voted (by a one vote margin) against divestment, rejecting the recommendation of a task force of students, faculty, and staff. According to an account by Jane Jacquette, a political science professor who was involved in the Occidental events, "The vote was a defeat for President Slaughter, who strongly supported divestment."

By then, however, South Africa's apartheid system was on its last legs -- and the divestment movement had played a key role in breaking the will of the apartheid government. In 1990, South African President F. W. de Klerk and Mandela (who was released from prison that year after 27 years behind bars) began negotiations to end apartheid. In a landmark vote in March 1992, an overwhelming majority of South African whites voted to end apartheid. After the ANC won the multiracial elections in 1994, Mandela became the country's first black president.

The divestment strategy that was so successful in helping dismantle apartheid has been utilized by other movements to push corporations to act more responsibly, including the current efforts by college students to put pressure on energy companies that contribute to global warming. And they've found an ally in Obama, who referred to the divestment effort during a major speech last June at Georgetown University outlining his plan to address climate change.

"I'm here to enlist your generation's help in keeping the United States of America a global leader in the fight against climate change," Obama told the Georgetown students, announcing his proposal to cut pollution from power plants, expand renewable energy development on public lands, and support climate-resilient investments.

Noting that big corporations will resist calls to reduce their unhealthy practices, Obama urged the students to "Convince those in power to reduce our carbon pollution. Push your own communities to adopt smarter practices. Invest. Divest. Remind folks there's no contradiction between a sound environment and strong economic growth."

The word "divest" was like a dog whistle to campus activists who've been pushing their colleges and universities to rid their endowments of stock in companies that are part of the fossil fuel industry, part of what they call the .350 campaign.

Modeled on the anti-apartheid campaigns of the 1980s, the fossil fuel divestment campaign began in the fall of 2012 and has spread to over 300 campuses across the country, including Yale, Ohio State, Stanford, Harvard, Swarthmore, Cornell, and the University of Colorado. The campaign is targeting the 200 largest energy companies that own the vast majority of coal, gas and oil reserves, including Exxon Mobil, Shell, Chevron, Peabody Energy, Mitsubishi, and BP.

In 2012, for example, 72 percent of Harvard's students voted for divesting its \$30 billion endowment from these corporations. Six colleges have already agreed to divest. In addition, a number of local governments -- including Seattle, San Francisco, Boulder, and Madison (Wisconsin) -- have pledged to dump fossil fuels from their pension fund investments because of the industry's responsibility for the climate crisis. Legislators in several states have authored bills to create fossil-free pension fund portfolios.

Bill McKibben, a Middlebury College professor and the guru of the fossil fuel divestment movement, says that the anti-apartheid movement was the inspiration for his current crusade. The battle to end American business' support of the apartheid regime, McKibben observed, is "the last great successful fight against corporate power."

Immediately after Obama's Georgetown speech last June, McKibben tweeted: "Obama sure seemed to give a shout out to divestment. Yikes."

It should not have come as a surprise that Obama, perhaps recalling his days as a student activist inspired by Mandela, would signal his support to the current generation of campus activists involved in another crusade for social justice.

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