

The former South African president with Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz at the Earth Summit last week



Nelson Mandela: The United States of America is a Threat to World Peace

In a rare interview, the South African demands that George W. Bush win United Nations support before attacking Iraq

NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Sept. 10 - Nelson Mandela, 84, may be the world's most respected statesman. Sentenced to life in prison on desolate Robben Island in 1964 for advocating armed resistance to apartheid in South Africa, the African National Congress leader emerged in 1990 to lead his country in a transition to non-racial elections. As president, his priority was racial reconciliation; today South Africans of all races refer to him by his Xhosa clan honorific, Madiba. Mandela stepped down in 1999 after a single five-year term. He now heads two foundations focused on children. He met with *Newsweek's* Tom Masland early Monday morning in his office in Houghton, a Johannesburg suburb, before flying to Limpopo Province to address traditional leaders on the country's AIDS crisis. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: Why are you speaking out on Iraq? Do you want to mediate, as you tried to on the Mideast a couple of years ago? It seems you are reentering the fray now.

Nelson Mandela: If I am asked, by credible organizations, to mediate, I will consider that very seriously. But a situation of this nature does not need an individual, it needs an organization like the United Nations to mediate. We must understand the seriousness of this situation. The United States has made serious mistakes in the conduct of its foreign affairs,

which have had unfortunate repercussions long after the decisions were taken.

Unqualified support of the Shah of Iran led directly to the Islamic revolution of 1979. Then the United States chose to arm and finance the [Islamic] mujahedin in Afghanistan instead of supporting and encouraging the moderate wing of the government of Afghanistan. That is what led to the Taliban in Afghanistan. But the most catastrophic action of the United States was to sabotage the decision that was painstakingly stitched together by the United Nations regarding the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan.

If you look at those matters, you will come to the conclusion that the attitude of the United States of America is a threat to world peace. Because what [America] is saying is that if you are afraid of a veto in the Security Council, you can go outside and take action and violate the sovereignty of other countries. That is the message they are sending to the world.

That must be condemned in the strongest terms. And you will notice that France, Germany, Russia, China are against this decision. It is clearly a decision that is motivated by George W. Bush's desire to please the arms and oil industries in the United States of America. If you look at those factors, you'll see that an individual like myself, a man who has lost power and influence, can never be a suitable mediator.

What about the argument that's being made about the threat of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and Saddam's efforts to build a nuclear weapons. After all, he has invaded other countries, he has fired missiles at Israel. On Thursday, President Bush is going to stand up in front of the United Nations and point to what he says is evidence of..

. . . Scott Ritter, a former United Nations arms inspector who is in Baghdad, has said that there is no evidence whatsoever of [development of weapons of] mass destruction. Neither Bush nor [British Prime Minister] Tony Blair has provided any evidence that such weapons exist. But what we know is that Israel has weapons of mass destruction. Nobody talks about that. Why should there be one standard for one country, especially because it is black, and another one for another country, Israel, that is white.

So you see this as a racial question?

Well, that element is there. In fact, many people say quietly, but they don't have the courage to stand up and say publicly, that when there were white secretary generals you didn't find this question of the United States and Britain going out of the United Nations. But now that you've had black secretary generals like Boutros Boutros Ghali, like Kofi Annan, they do not respect the United Nations. They have contempt for it. This is not my view, but that is what is being said by many people.

What kind of compromise can you see that might avoid the coming confrontation?

There is one compromise and one only, and that is the United Nations. If the United States and Britain go to the United Nations and the United Nations says we have concrete evidence of the existence of these weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and we feel that we must do something about it, we would all support it.

Do you think that the Bush administration's U.N. diplomatic effort now is genuine, or is the President just looking for political cover by speaking to the U.N. even as he remains intent on forging ahead unilaterally?

Well, there is no doubt that the United States now feels that they are the only superpower in the world and they can do what they like. And of course we must consider the men and the women around the president. Gen. Colin Powell commanded the United States army in peacetime and in wartime during the Gulf war. He knows the disastrous effect of international tension and war, when innocent people are going to die, young men are going to die. He knows and he showed this after September 11 last year. He went around briefing the allies of the United States of America and asking for their support for the war in Afghanistan.

But people like Dick Cheney . . . I see yesterday there was an article that said he is the real president of the United States of America, I don't know how true that is. Dick Cheney, [Defense secretary Donald] Rumsfeld, they are people who are unfortunately misleading the president. Because my impression of the president is that this is a man with whom you can do business. But it is the men who around him who are dinosaurs, who do not want him to belong to the modern age. The only man, the only person who wants to help Bush move to the modern era is Gen. Colin Powell, the secretary of State.

I gather you are particularly concerned about Vice President Cheney?

Well, there is no doubt. He opposed the decision to release me from prison (laughs). The majority of the U.S. Congress was in favor of my release, and he opposed it. But it's not because of that. Quite clearly we are dealing with an arch-conservative in Dick Cheney.

I'm interested in your decision to speak out now about Iraq. When you left office, you said, "I'm going to go down to Transkei, and have a rest." Now maybe that was a joke at the time. But you've been very active.

I really wanted to retire and rest and spend more time with my children, my grandchildren and of course with my wife. But the problems are such that for anybody with a conscience who can use whatever influence he may have to try to bring about peace, it's difficult to say no.

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