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Rational Resistance in "I Am Prepared to Die"

Nelson Mandela appeared in the Rivonia Trial in April 1964 before the Supreme Court in Pretoria. He was accused of sabotage and leadership in Umkhonto we Sizwe. The speech was both a statement of law and a call to the people. Mandela positioned resistance as a rational response to state violence. He persuaded with credibility, historical logic, and emotion. What came out was a text defending a strategy and calling the world to moral attention.

Mandela starts by introducing himself as "the first accused." He quickly builds his credibility. He reminds the court that he has a bachelor's degree and that he practiced as an attorney in Johannesburg (Mandela). This is important because it makes him look like a serious professional, not just a rebel. He admits openly that he helped form Umkhonto we Sizwe, but he stresses that his choices were based on careful thought, not reckless violence. The way he explains his background makes the court see him as someone who has experience, responsibility, and reasons for what he did.

He also uses logic to show how the struggle reached this point. Mandela explains that the African National Congress spent decades trying nonviolent approaches. He recalls how the ANC organized petitions, meetings, and the defiance campaign, where thousands were arrested but never fought back violently (Mandela). He then shows that the government responded not with fairness but with harsher laws like the Public Safety Act. This reasoning is clear: peaceful protest

was crushed, and that left no real options. Mandela also separates sabotage from terrorism. He points out that the goal was to attack property, not people. This part of his argument makes sense because it shows planning and control rather than random violence.

Feeling comes in with memory and collective loss as opposed to sentiment. Mandela recalls that as a boy, he heard stories about how leaders defended their lands and people. He associates those narratives with an existent battle of dignity in a system that denied rights and humiliated families (Mandela). The impact is slow and gradual. He does not plead with the court to have mercy. He provides a moral framework and situates himself within it. His final exposition that he is ready to die in support of a free and equal society is an exposition of devotion with no angry tone.

Emotion supplements judgment, not substitutes it.

The address is influenced at every stage by the audience's awareness. Judge Quartus de Wet was the immediate audience, and he alone had the right to sentence. Mandela shows respect to the court and the process. He is also aware that the legal avenue to acquittal is thin. He hence develops a record among readers and listeners outside the courtroom. His words would be taken to those who were going to vote in favor of or against the regime by reporters and international observers. His two-address writing defended the movement against the one unfriendly gatekeeper and offered a larger verdict on the system itself.

The bigger picture renders the speech pressing and definite. Sharpeville had demonstrated to the world a state that responded to protest with bullets. The ANC was outlawed and pushed into the shadows by the government. New legislation increased the price of even non-violent dissent. In that context, the method and motive narrated by Mandela refute the argument that overseas

scripts guide the movement. He describes his deeds as being informed by African experience and a long history of patient struggle that was met with force and silence (Mandela). He relates the personal narrative, national history, and world conscience in a single tale.

His style lends power to his appeals. His language is professional yet personal. Legal terms are often positioned alongside ordinary scenes in everyday life. Sentences lead the listener through the course of the case and do not create sudden curves. He frequently calls a claim, adds some brief confirmation, and then declares a limit. This cadence is a form of the discipline he encourages in the movement. The voice is calm and collected. Such a peaceful state generates credibility and reveals the contrast between calculated recalcitrance and savagery concealed behind legislation.

The speech is well organized to aid understanding. He identifies the accusations and his position. He responds to the accusation of foreign influence. He follows the history of nonviolent protest. He provides the rationale behind choosing sabotage over people-directed forms of violence. He determines the purpose of a democratic and equal society and proclaims his readiness to die in support of it (Mandela). Each part leads to the conclusion that the procedure is regulated, the purpose is fair, and the speaker is ready to bear complete responsibility.

Overall, *I Am Prepared to Die* is a successful piece of persuasion and a social conscience journal. Mandela bases his argument on the history that has been lived and on a clear set of moral objectives. He addresses a judge who will probably punish him and a world that can decide in solidarity. His style is calm, clear, and organized. The speech stands as more than just a

courtroom moment. It remains an example of how rhetoric can support freedom and expose injustice.

Works Cited

Mandela, Nelson. "I Am Prepared to Die." Statement at the Rivonia Trial, Pretoria Supreme Court, 20 Apr. 1964.

Reflection

I chose Nelson Mandela's "I Am Prepared to Die" because it is both historically powerful and rhetorically rich. His trial speech provides more than enough material for analysis since it

combines legal reasoning, moral philosophy, and personal sacrifice. I also felt drawn to this text because it asks readers to think about justice and resistance in ways that remain relevant today. The speech allowed me to explore how a leader facing death used rhetoric not only to defend himself but also to frame a vision of a free and equal society. The process of my writing about this project was a challenging yet enriching one. Initially, I paid excessive attention to summarizing the content of the speech. In the revision, I also began to assess the rhetorical techniques used by Mandela by understanding the collaboration of ethos, logos, and pathos. I also became more attentive to audience analysis and context because these components of the rubric required more detailed explanations than I initially provided. Writing and revising my essay helped me distinguish between conclusion and analysis, and to construct each paragraph around a particular rhetorical idea. I am happy that my final paper strikes the right balance between detail and evaluation. I believe I have managed to record the credibility, reason, and emotion Mandela employed without falling into either agreement or disagreement with his political standpoint. If I had more time, I would have included even more secondary sources to support the historical context.

Nevertheless, I believe that the paper has been analyzed carefully and meets the task's requirements.

"I Am Prepared To Die"



Nelson Mandela during his 1964 trial. Nelson Mandela's statement at the opening of the defense case in the Rivonia Trial

(Pretoria Supreme Court, April 20, 1964)

I am the First Accused.

I hold a Bachelor's Degree in Arts and practised as an attorney in Johannesburg for a number of years in partnership with Oliver Tambo. I am a convicted prisoner serving five years for leaving the country without a permit and for inciting people to go on strike at the end of May 1961.

At the outset, I want to say that the suggestion made by the State in its opening that the struggle in South Africa is under the influence of foreigners or communists is wholly incorrect. I have done whatever I did, both as an individual and as a leader of my people, because of my experience in South Africa and my own proudly felt African background, and not because of what any outsider might have said.

In my youth in the Transkei I listened to the elders of my tribe telling stories of the old days. Amongst the tales they related to me were those of wars fought by our ancestors in defence of the fatherland. The names of Dingane and Bambata, Hintsa and Makana, Squngthi and Dalasile, Moshoeshoe and Sekhukhuni, were praised as the glory of the entire African nation. I hoped then that life might offer me the opportunity to serve my people and make my own humble contribution to their freedom struggle. This is what has motivated me in all that I have done in relation to the charges made against me in this case.

Having said this, I must deal immediately and at some length with the question of violence. Some of the things so far told to the Court are true and some are untrue. I do not, however, deny that I planned sabotage. I did not plan it in a spirit of recklessness, nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people by the Whites.

I admit immediately that I was one of the persons who helped to form Umkhonto we Sizwe, and that I played a prominent role in its affairs until I was arrested in August 1962.

In the statement which I am about to make I shall correct certain false impressions which have been created by State witnesses. Amongst other things, I will demonstrate that certain of the acts referred to in the evidence were not and could not have been committed by Umkhonto. I will also deal with the relationship between the African National Congress and Umkhonto, and with the part which I personally have played in the affairs of both organizations. I shall deal also with the part played by the Communist Party. In order to explain these matters properly, I will have to explain what Umkhonto set out to achieve; what methods it prescribed for the achievement of

these objects, and why these methods were chosen. I will also have to explain how I became involved in the activities of these organizations.

I deny that Umkhonto was responsible for a number of acts which clearly fell outside the policy of the organisation, and which have been charged in the indictment against us. I do not know what justification there was for these acts, but to demonstrate that they could not have been authorized by Umkhonto, I want to refer briefly to the roots and policy of the organization.

I have already mentioned that I was one of the persons who helped to form Umkhonto. I, and the others who started the organization, did so for two reasons. *Firstly*, we believed that as a result of Government policy, violence by the African people had become inevitable, and that unless responsible leadership was given to canalize and control the feelings of our people, there would be outbreaks of terrorism which would produce an intensity of bitterness and hostility between the various races of this country which is not produced even by war. *Secondly*, we felt that without violence there would be no way open to the African people to succeed in their struggle against the principle of white supremacy. All lawful modes of expressing opposition to this principle had been closed by legislation, and we were placed in a position in which we had either to accept a permanent state of inferiority, or to defy the Government. We chose to defy the law. We first broke the law in a way which avoided any recourse to violence; when this form was legislated against, and then the Government resorted to a show of force to crush opposition to its policies, only then did we decide to answer violence with violence.

But the violence which we chose to adopt was not terrorism. We who formed Umkhonto were all members of the African National Congress, and had behind us the ANC tradition of non-violence and negotiation as a means of solving political disputes. We believe that South Africa belongs to

all the people who live in it, and not to one group, be it black or white. We did not want an interracial war, and tried to avoid it to the last minute. If the Court is in doubt about this, it will be seen that the whole history of our organization bears out what I have said, and what I will subsequently say, when I describe the tactics which Umkhonto decided to adopt. I want, therefore, to say something about the African National Congress.

The African National Congress was formed in 1912 to defend the rights of the African people which had been seriously curtailed by the South Africa Act, and which were then being threatened by the Native Land Act. For thirty-seven years - that is until 1949 - it adhered strictly to a constitutional struggle. It put forward demands and resolutions; it sent delegations to the Government in the belief that African grievances could be settled through peaceful discussion and that Africans could advance gradually to full political rights. But White Governments remained unmoved, and the rights of Africans became less instead of becoming greater. In the words of my leader, Chief Lutuli, who became President of the ANC in 1952, and who was later awarded the Nobel Peace Prize:

"who will deny that thirty years of my life have been spent knocking in vain, patiently, moderately, and modestly at a closed and barred door? What have been the fruits of moderation? The past thirty years have seen the greatest number of laws restricting our rights and progress, until today we have reached a stage where we have almost no rights at all".

Even after 1949, the ANC remained determined to avoid violence. At this time, however, there was a change from the strictly constitutional means of protest which had been employed in the past. The change was embodied in a decision which was taken to protest against apartheid legislation by peaceful, but unlawful, demonstrations against certain laws. Pursuant to this policy

the ANC launched the Defiance Campaign, in which I was placed in charge of volunteers. This campaign was based on the principles of passive resistance. More than 8,500 people defied apartheid laws and went to jail. Yet there was not a single instance of violence in the course of this campaign on the part of any defier. I and nineteen colleagues were convicted for the role which we played in organizing the campaign, but our sentences were suspended mainly because the Judge found that discipline and non-violence had been stressed throughout. This was the time when the volunteer section of the ANC was established, and when the word 'Amadelakufa' was first used: this was the time when the volunteers were asked to take a pledge to uphold certain principles. Evidence dealing with volunteers and their pledges has been introduced into this case, but completely out of context. The volunteers were not, and are not, the soldiers of a black army pledged to fight a civil war against the whites. They were, and are, dedicated workers who are prepared to lead campaigns initiated by the ANC to distribute leaflets, to organize strikes, or do whatever the particular campaign required. They are called volunteers because they volunteer to face the penalties of imprisonment and whipping which are now prescribed by the legislature for such acts.

During the Defiance Campaign, the Public Safety Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act were passed. These Statutes provided harsher penalties for offences committed by way of protests against laws. Despite this, the protests continued and the ANC adhered to its policy of non-violence. In 1956, 156 leading members of the Congress Alliance, including myself, were arrested on a charge of high treason and charges under the Suppression of Communism Act. The non-violent policy of the ANC was put in issue by the State, but when the Court gave judgement some five years later, it found that the ANC did not have a policy of violence. We were acquitted on all counts, which included a count that the ANC sought to set up a communist state in place of

the existing regime. The Government has always sought to label all its opponents as communists. This allegation has been repeated in the present case, but as I will show, the ANC is not, and never has been, a communist organization.

In 1960 there was the shooting at Sharpeville, which resulted in the proclamation of a state of emergency and the declaration of the ANC as an unlawful organization. My colleagues and I, after careful consideration, decided that we would not obey this decree. The African people were not part of the Government and did not make the laws by which they were governed. We believed in the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that 'the will of the people shall be the basis of authority of the Government', and for us to accept the banning was equivalent to accepting the silencing of the Africans for all time. The ANC refused to dissolve, but instead went underground. We believed it was our duty to preserve this organization which had been built up with almost fifty years of unremitting toil. I have no doubt that no self-respecting White political organization would disband itself if declared illegal by a government in which it had no say.