MANDELA GETS MIXED REVIEWS FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

On June 20, Nelson Mandela and his wife Winnie arrived in New York to begin their historic tour of the United States. As hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers, led by Mayor David N. Dinkins, opened their hearts to the visitors, the *New York Times* chose to play master of the mixed message. While the other New York dailies greeted the South Africa hero's arrival with banner headlines and front-page photographs, and local radio and TV stations and CNN provided live coverage of the day's events, the *Times* chose a different approach — one unsettling in its inconsistency and implications.

At the top center of the front page was a large photo, also of a well-known black leader — Washington's Mayor Marion S. Barry, Jr., along with downcast wife Effie, arriving at court for his drug trial.

Below the centerfold (out of sight for newsstand display), and without a photo, began an article by Christopher S. Wren entitled, "Mandela the Messenger, Celebrated, Yet Life-Size." This qualified praise set the tone for the continuing coverage on page A16.

New York Times Theme: A Black is a Felon

There, an article by John Kifner largely devoted to the official agenda and security measures employed to protect Mandela, included the following highlighted phrase (which was not in the story): "The *former inmate* will be hailed as a hero amid heavy security" (emphasis added). Thus the *Times* picked up the theme of black as felon which graced its front page. To refer to a political prisoner of Mandela's stature, incarcerated 27 years for his beliefs and the color of his skin, as a "former inmate," was insensitive at best and a calculated insult at worst. When has the *Times* referred to a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp as a "former inmate?"

Is Marion Barry Getting a Bum Rap?

Speaking of negative media treatment of blacks... So far, the *New York Times* has printed the photo of Washington Mayor Marion Barry Jr. smoking crack on videotape *four times*. That must be some sort of a record.

The *NYT* never settles for running the same photo over and over. It just isn't done. But this blurry image of an intensely private moment — the highlight of the FBI's 90-minute documentary produced for C-Span and the jury — seems to be an exception.

The photo first illustrated a story, then became a story in itself. Critic Walter Goodman even did a meta-story, dissecting the videotaped scene between Barry and Rasheeda Moore in a hotel room. "Viewers," he writes, "are likely to be left wondering whether the desires or needs that allowed so experienced a man to be lured into so patent a trap go deeper than even a craving for drugs or for sex."

That's fine and interesting for drama, but this is real life. Does this unwitting actor deserve to have his most private moments broadcast on TV and played over and over in the newspaper? Should such a photograph, derived from a secret videotape, be used in a newspaper at all? We don't know the entire context of the photo, or just how good the "evidence" is. All we know is what the FBI tells us.

Did Moore offer Barry sex if he smoked crack with her? Hard to say. Is is our business if a mayor smokes crack? Maybe. Is it our right to watch him flirt with a woman in a hotel room and end up getting busted? Probably not.

Reprinted by permission from Laura Fraser's July 25 column in the San Francisco Bay Guardian.

Nelson and Winnie Mandela arrived in New York to a thunderous welcome from the city's people — and a somewhat less enthusiastic response from the nation's "newspaper of record."

The front-page story, although acknowledging Mandela's stature, lack of "personal animosity," and stamina, took on a begrudging tone as it dredged up reservations about Mandela and the ANC.

The article quoted F.W. de Klerk's criticism of Mandela for "espousing a continuation of the guerrilla struggle." Wren raised the twin menaces of nationalization and land redistribution on the one hand, while suggesting, on the other, that Mandela may have softened his position on these issues. He also implied that Mandela's role was to act as a figurehead for an ANC strategy to project itself as more moderate than it really is. Wren questioned Mandela's sincerity, referring to ANC's sympathy for the PLO, Castro, and Qaddafi, all geared to conjure suspicion in his readers.

Finally, Wren's article cast doubts on Mandela's ability to lead — "Mr. Mandela can still draw tens of thousands of supporters to a really, but they may not do what he urges" — and concluded by questioning his reluctance to reveal his political ambitions. Wren had not, of course, seen Mandela adroitly debate *Nightline* host Ted Koppel on the issues, as he did the next evening. One must wonder what the *Times* has really chose to say, and why such qualified praise has been allotted to such a monumental figure.

— *Nancy Watt Rosenfeld*

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