

# Terry Bell Writes

News & Views by Terry Bell

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## FW de Klerk has so much more to apologise for

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There is nothing new in former president FW de Klerk's denialist views about the apartheid system he so faithfully served. Nor in yet another belated apology of sorts. What is new is that the issue has been raised in parliament where he has regularly attended State or the Nation (SONA) addresses, sitting as a VIP guest in the gallery.

Over the past 27 years he has made numerous controversial statements in an apparent attempt to whitewash apartheid and his role in what the United Nations general assembly termed a crime against humanity. And, as probably the first head of state ever to face a murder charge while in office, he has done it again.

The difference this time is that his insensitive and self-serving comments, compounded by a statement from his foundation, provided ammunition for an opportunistic display in parliament by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Yet, in the past, De Klerk has been greeted and acknowledged as a former president and deputy president and politely applauded in parliament while in his seat, overlooking the EFF benches.

Not that De Klerk's odious history is unknown, although the responsibility for a great deal of his public rehabilitation rests with Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. In the cause of "reconciliation" Mandela was prepared to accept De Klerk as deputy president in a government of national unity, although he also publicly noted, and never retracted, comments that De Klerk was guilty of "thuggery" and had "blood on his hands".

These comments were made in October 1993 when Mandela was briefed a week after the massacre of five school students by one of the apartheid state's hit squads. With the admitted authorisation of De Klerk and his top ministers, the squad crossed the border into Transkei (then still nominally an independent country), and carried out the killings.

While the gunmen and their immediate superiors remained a mystery, De Klerk announced that he had been "fully informed" and had ordered the destruction of "an Apla facility" in the Transkei. A house in the Mthatha suburb of North Crest, he said, was a base used by the

Azanian People's Liberation Army, the military wing of the PAC. The police followed with a statement in which they said that the raid on the North Crest house had been a "27-minute operation"; that the "five terrorists" who had died had "offered resistance".

As subsequent investigations clearly revealed, these were lies. And they were quickly exploded, largely through the work of Dumisa Ntsebeza, who was then still a human rights lawyer based in Mthatha. The five victims were Samora and Sadat, the 16-year-old twin sons of local butcher Siggipo Mpendulo, and their friends, Thando Mthembu, 17, and Mzwandile Mfeya and Sandiso Yose, both just 12.

As the first inquiry, conducted in loco by Lawyers for Human Rights, discovered, there was no evidence of resistance: the five were shot as they lay, apparently asleep, on mattresses on the floor before the television. An independent post-mortem later established that 16 bullets had been fired into the body of Sadat Mpendulo, 11 into his twin, Samora, and that, between them, Sandiso Yose and Mzwandile Mfeya had been shot 37 times. Six bullets ended the life of Thando Mthembu.

In a televised interview two weeks after the massacre, Mandela made his comments about De Klerk's complicity. He went on to note that De Klerk had not apologised and "did not have the decency to apologise".

But this was a time when the mainstream media focus was on speculation about a negotiated settlement and on the prospect of the joint Nobel peace prize award. No attention was paid to angry demonstrations in Mthatha about the killings. Only the independent, anti-apartheid New Nation newspaper checked the facts on the ground and produced a banner front page headline: SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS.

Mandela, too, did not raise the issue again, even when, just days before the Nobel award ceremony in Oslo, a civil action demanding compensation for murder from De Klerk, his foreign minister, Roelof "Pik" Botha, law and order minister Hernus Kriel, and defence minister Kobie Coetsee was lodged with the Transkei Supreme Court. This infuriated De Klerk and the security establishment, but no major newspaper, radio or television station would take up the issue.

I know, because, having interviewed Ntsebeza and having obtained the results of the initial investigations, I was unable to place the report of the civil murder charge or the results of the initial investigations with any of the media. Trying to do so seemed to be regarded as a shabby attempt at political mudslinging.

It wasn't just the South African media. When De Klerk left to fly to Oslo to meet up with Mandela and receive the joint Nobel peace prize, he flew in the private presidential jet, NAN, via European capitals. This included Rome and audiences in London with the British queen and

her prime minister, John Major. None of the major media at any of his stopovers accepted the report from the Transkei.

I was angry, frustrated, and complained loudly to a group of fellow journalists when we met up in a Waterfront bar in Cape Town. It was Fergal Keane, then the BBC correspondent in South Africa, who expressed no surprise at the lack of interest. And he probably accurately assessed the media reaction when he asked, rhetorically: “Who wants to bugger up a fairytale?”

It was true that the idea of an almost miraculous “rainbow nation” was then dawning and, by that stage, De Klerk also seemed to have become convinced that he was the central figure in a morality play of his own scripting and in which he deserved international adulation. En route to Norway he had received the attention he felt was his due, but not in Oslo. Outside the Nobel prize ceremony, for example, there were protesters who hailed Mandela and shouted: “De Klerk — go home!”. De Klerk publicly complained about the “reserved” reception given to him as opposed to the “effusive and unrestrained” welcome accorded Mandela. He lodged similar complaints about the Nobel ceremony.

The “blood on his hands” comment also continued to annoy him. A year later, he complained bitterly to American author and journalist Patti Waldmeir about the accusation. He said he was horrified to be labelled in this manner. It was unfair. Mandela had failed to understand “the complexity of the situation”.

This complexity involved the Codesa negotiations, the threats from the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging and “Third Force” violence. At the same time, the concept of reconciliation was being heavily promoted, along with the prospect of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). And a TRC might be undermined by pursuing a civil case for murder against the core of the former apartheid cabinet.

As a result, in all the political deal-fixing, the North Crest case fell from public notice. Mandela stated that he instructed De Klerk to financially compensate the families of the murdered boys and their funerals were paid for by the state. In exchange, the civil action for murder was dropped, but only because the families believed that the truth would emerge at the TRC. It never did.

Instead, in 1998 in a self-serving autobiography, De Klerk expressed regret about the raid. He claimed he had acted in good faith and that he had instructed the attackers to “use minimum force”. If this was so, the hit squad had obviously disobeyed orders and should be liable to be tried for the murders they had committed. That view was held strongly by Mpendulo. He did not let the matter rest; he wanted to know who had pulled the triggers, what was the chain of command, from De Klerk down, and how information, claimed to be “erroneous” came to be acted on.

These and other details about the crime against humanity, along with De Klerk's publicly admitted involvement in ordering the North Crest massacre, I included in a book, *Unfinished Business — South Africa, apartheid & truth* that was written in collaboration with Dumisa Ntsebeza and first published in 2001. At the time, a series of class action lawsuits against banks and companies that profited from the apartheid system were being prepared for the New York courts.

Mpendulo, a Pan Africanist Congress activist who had been imprisoned on Robben Island, was one of the first claimants listed in these lawsuits. He made it clear that he wanted the murder of his children to be seen not as an isolated or aberrant act, but as a logical extension of a system that made victims of millions of people. The TRC had failed him and the other families, so he looked to New York — and was once again frustrated. Even then South African President Thabo Mbeki refused to support the claims that finally fell by the legal wayside.

At the same time, De Klerk never changed his position — and continued to be accepted, if occasionally grudgingly, by the new establishment. He has not changed, never applied for, or received amnesty and never disclosed the truth about the North Crest massacre and so much more. There is so much more to apologise for than this latest comment — and so much truth that remains untold.

What De Klerk and his foundation have done is to provide the EFF with an opportunity to deflect interest from their apparent legal woes regarding the plunder of the VBS bank. And they have also reinforced the statement made by Mandela in 1993: "When it comes the blacks he (De Klerk) is absolutely insensitive."

## Reference

Bell, T. (2020). [FW de Klerk has so much more to apologise for](https://terrybellwrites.com/2020/02/20/fw-de-klerk-has-so-much-more-to-apologise-for/), from *News & Views by Terry Bell*, February 20, 2020, online. Available at <https://terrybellwrites.com/2020/02/20/fw-de-klerk-has-so-much-more-to-apologise-for/> . Accessed on 20 February 2020.