

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project
Tales of American Diplomacy

HERMAN JAY “HANK” COHEN

Copyright 2019 ADST

[Note: This transcript is from the Tales of American Diplomacy Video Series. Watch the video [HERE](#) or listen to the podcast [HERE](#).]

NARRATOR: In a one on one meeting in 1989, future South African President F. W. de Klerk told Hank Cohen, America's senior diplomat for Africa, that if elected he would free Mandela, unban the ANC (African National Congress), and end apartheid. De Klerk delivered. Here is that story.

COHEN: My name is Herman Jay Cohen. My colleagues at the State Department call me Hank. I had a very interesting experience when I was Assistant Secretary of State [for African Affairs] in South Africa because there was a lot of discussions going on about, "Are the white people going to end apartheid?" This [was a] system of segregation where the blacks were totally repressed, and the 15% of the population worldwide were getting all the economic advantages. The whole world was against South Africa--there were sanctions; the U.S. had sanctions; the Europeans had sanctions. The question was, "Would change be able to come about?" Well, in August of 1989, there was an election in the white community. The blacks never participated in an election. It looked like a new generation of whites were coming to power. The old guard who had started apartheid were in their eighties, and they had to leave.

So, new new people were coming in. One of the leading candidates of the main white party was F. W. [Frederik Willem] de Klerk, the Minister of Education. So, I went down to South Africa in August of 1989. I asked to see him. He was the leading candidate and most likely to be elected president. He was in Durban, the beach city on the Indian Ocean, campaigning. And he said, "Well, you can come down and meet me there." I went down to Durban, and he met me in his hotel room one on one--we had no note takers, it was just me and him. And he said, "You know, I'm a child of apartheid. I was brought up in it. I believed in it. I still believe in it. I thought that was the best thing for the white people. But I'm going to tell you something right now. We're going to end it when I become president."

I said, "You're gonna end it! Why are you going to end it?" He said, "We are an industrial nation, and we cannot advance and expand our economy without the assistance of the black population. We need their labor. We need them to be educated, to become professionals, engineers, computer scientists, technicians of all kinds. And we can't have that unless they have political rights. So, when I become president, we're going to legalize the African National Congress, the Communist Party, all the political

organizations of the blacks, and we're going to release Nelson Mandela." So, I listened to that. I couldn't believe a word. I was just stunned to hear this. After all these decades of hard line, you know, "we're going to keep apartheid, we're going to keep segregation."

And so, I went out of that meeting almost staggering, and I immediately reported this to Washington. I sent a message to Secretary Baker. I said, "We've got to invite this person--even before he becomes president--make sure he doesn't go backwards; that he keeps on what he says. I got a message back from Secretary Baker saying, "President Bush does not want to invite anybody from South Africa before he invites Mandela. Mandela will be the first person invited. After that, we can have de Klerk and other people." So I was just totally happy, but I couldn't talk about it. Then I get back to Washington, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee holds hearings in October. My meeting with de Klerk was in August. The election was going to be in December. So, I go to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the topic was "increasing sanctions against South Africa." So, the question that was going to come along that they sent us in advance was "What has been the impact of sanctions on South Africa?"

This led to a big debate in the State Department because we knew President Bush hated those sanctions. So we couldn't come out and say, "Oh, the sanctions were great. You know, they really made them think again about their policy." So, we came up with compromise language: sanctions had the most difficult impact on the black community because it stopped investments and it caused a rise in black unemployment. The whites didn't suffer economic hardship, but they had a psychological impact on the whites and they got them to think about maybe their system wasn't that great. I was authorized to give this to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I go up there, and Senator Simon asks the question, and I give the answer. After I gave that answer, he said, "Well, it sounds to me like if we have more sanctions that'll really push them over the top." So, knowing what de Klerk told me what he was going to do after he got elected, I said, "Senator, that's something to talk about, maybe increasing sanctions, but you know, they're having an election. New People are coming in; you never know what they're going to be doing. So let's have another session of this committee in February, and I'd be very happy to talk about increasing sanctions at that point." So, they said, "Yes. Okay, that's a deal. We'll meet again in February." I go back to State Department and Secretary Baker said to me, "Gee, Hank, you bought us some time. Isn't that great?" Okay. So, the next day in South Africa, headlines: "We do not accept ultimatums." They saw my testimony as an ultimatum: "shape up or they're going to be more sanctions." But anyway, it was a fantastic experience carrying the secret from de Klerk for six months until they had an election. And of course, he kept his word; he released Mandela, and everything was uphill from that point.

NARRATOR: Thanks for listening to "Tales of American Diplomacy," a Tex Harris Initiative for the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, "A Personal Life Story" produced by Poss Productions. Donate to support our work at adst.org. Because diplomacy matters now more than ever.