

The darkest days for Mandela and the media

 By [Chris Moerdyk](#)

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With the spotlight so blindingly focussed on an ailing Nelson Mandela as he fights for his life, it is difficult not to keep recalling his darkest days and the massive challenges the media had in telling these to the world.

Friday 12 June 1964 dawned a typical winter's day in Pretoria. Windless and cold with clear blue skies, the roads filled with shiny new cars and impeccable municipal busses carrying happy, carefree white people off to protected employment in cosy offices. All dreaming of a weekend of golf, camping trips or just sitting at home in front of a roaring fire and listening to "The Creaking Door" or "Inspector Carr Investigates" on Springbok Radio.

On the other side of town, Putco buses crammed full of black people roared through the countryside ignoring solid white lines and running cars off the road as their drivers aspired to become the next spectacular road death statistics. Quite the most bizarre national pastime of that era and precursor to the taxi carnage of modern South Africa.

But, there was something different going on in Pretoria that day. Roadblocks encircled the city with police stopping and searching cars. Mercilessly turning traffic away.

It was the day Nelson Mandela was to be sentenced in the Palace of Justice on the north side of Church Square in the city centre.

And the police were under orders to keep black agitators, black troublemakers, in fact probably just blacks in general away from the city in case they had the effrontery to try and get close to the Palace of Justice to hear the verdict.

Fending off the 'instrument of the Devil'

They also had orders to keep foreign television news crews away. In those days, in spite of the fact that foreign journalists were allowed into the courtroom, the government had a thing about television news. The incumbent minister of communication at the time, Albert Hertzog, was so verkramp he walked with a stoop and had declared publicly on numerous occasions that television was an "instrument of the Devil." He wasn't kidding either - he really believed it. With the result that being part of a TV news crew in those days was tantamount to admitting to the world that one not only practiced witchcraft and devil worship but cut up and ate babies for breakfast.

At the time I was Southern African news editor for United Press International based in Johannesburg and was accompanying my colleague and mentor, Ernie Christie, who headed up UPI Newsfilm television, to both cover the story and do commentary into camera.

We left Johannesburg early in the morning but were turned back by a police roadblock on what was then the main road to Pretoria just about where the South African mint is situated in Midrand today.

We tried going via Hartebeestpoort Dam but hit another roadblock round about where Lanseria airport would eventually be built.

'How do we get to Loftus?'

We were now running out of time. With my mother's family having come from Premier Mine East of Pretoria, I knew that neck of the woods quite well, so we headed towards Delmas and then cut through Rayton to Premier Mine (now known wrongly as Cullinan) and then snuck our way through Pretoria's suburb of Colbyn and managed to park our car near Pretoria Central Railway Station. We walked towards Church Square with Christie's camera equipment in cheap suitcases, telling the police who stopped us that we were tourists from Durban who were on our way to our hotel and then Loftus Versveld Rugby Stadium to watch Currie Cup rugby the next day.

Our mission was to augment the news coverage of UPI bureau Chief Neil Smith who was in the courtroom, with TV coverage and commentary from outside the Palace of Justice.

All the way in, Christie was fretting about shooting news film on a deserted Church Square that would not in any way mirror the historic drama that was taking place in the courtroom.

Quartus forced to give quarter

He needn't have worried because about 2,000 people - all blacks - had gathered on Church Square and simply stood their ground when police shouted, threatened and cajoled them into moving.

It was a bizarre sight, seeing for perhaps the first time in history, so many black faces and nary a white one on Church Square. Many in the crowd were carrying placards in support of their leaders who were awaiting their fate. All sombre and silent. Apprehension and despair evident in every face.

After all, it was assumed that Justice Quartus de Wet, Judge President of the Transvaal, would sentence Mandela to death.

They were not to know that in spite of the notorious premier Hendrik Verwoerd having told parliament that the life sentence imposed on Mandela instead of the death penalty was not influenced by the massive international campaign for leniency, that Justice de Wet had actually admitted in passing to Mandela's legal team that the immense foreign pressure had simply made it impossible for him to impose the death penalty.

As the crowd waited for de Wet to pronounce sentence, Christie set up his TV camera on Church Square to give him the best view of the crowds and the facade of the Palace of Justice that housed the Supreme Court.

A protective laager

The crowd was still sparse and scattered around the whole of the square, and as I started to do my first commentary into camera we heard warning hisses from those people near us and turned to see a policeman and his dog coming towards us with some considerable determination and intent.

About a dozen or so metres from us, he let the dog off its leash and it came at us snarling - its hackles up and teeth bared. It knocked Christie's camera and tripod over and managed to give me a nip on the leg just before Christie took a swipe at it with a fairly heavy 16mm Bell & Howell "Filmo" camera he used for fill-in shots.

The dog took off and the policeman, now mad as a snake, chased after it swearing at us and saying that he would come back and get us.

As we starting picking up our equipment and getting ready to run like hell from what we believed would be the arrival half the South African Police Force hell bent on getting even with us for daring to hit one of their prized Alsations with a camera (we were told later Christie broke two of its teeth), the most remarkable thing happened.

The crowd that was spread sparsely over Church Square suddenly came together around us in a protective laager of humanity. They asked us please to carry on telling our story and not to worry about the police because none of them was about to move an inch.

I have never in my life, felt so safe

Soon afterwards the sentence was announced and a wave of relief swept through the crowd. Women ululated and some of the men cried. Mandela would live. He would be in jail but he would remain alive to be an icon of hope for the next 27 years.

And indeed, 27 years later I had the privilege of meeting Nelson Mandela on two occasions. One was when he met with my then boss, Ebehardt von Kuenheim, chairman of BMW AG in Germany. And the second was when I met with him and Cyril Ramaphosa at Mandela's home in Houghton, Johannesburg, to discuss BMW's concerns for his safety in the run-up to the country's first democratic elections and to offer our help by lending him a security car.

I told him the story of what happened outside the Palace of Justice on that fateful day in 1964 and proudly showed off the scar on my leg where the dog bit me.

And when I told him how those crowds of people gathered round to protect us, he just smiled because clearly that sort of gesture from his people was nothing new to him.

This is an excerpt from the eBook "Personal Encounters with Nelson Mandela, Bobby Kennedy and Tessie the Tassle Tosser" by Chris Moerdyk. <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006QP4P9K>.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on moerdykc@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).

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