

**Dr Peter Friedland**, an ear, nose and throat specialist, was a member of Nelson Mandela's medical team charged with looking after his hearing. Their conversations often veered towards politics, with Mandela carefully shifting Friedland's perspective. In this edited extract from his book 'Quiet Time with the President', Friedland writes about how Madiba was capable of seeing beyond the scope of the global viewpoint and looking at a problem from many sides



President Nelson Mandela greets his Libyan counterpart, Muammar Gaddafi, at Cape Town airport on June 13 1999. The Libyan leader had arrived in South Africa for a three-day state visit before attending the inauguration of Thabo Mbeki as the country's new president. Peter Friedland writes that Madiba was close to Gaddafi and remained loyal to him through many turbulent years. Picture: Odd Andersen

# Feeling the pulse of wisdom

**E**arly in 2008, a radio report about Libya caught my attention – UN Security Council for a month. This was startling: Libya's swaggering leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, was known for having people "disappear" and for sending hit squads to wipe out his opponents in exile. Then there was that dark massacre of 1,200 prisoners in a maximum security prison in Tripoli. Libya had long been a pariah state. Obviously, I'd missed the turnaround.

Madiba was close to Gaddafi and remained loyal to him through many turbulent years. In South Africa, this friendship had been frowned upon, and some notable world leaders had condemned it outright, but Madiba held fast. I was due to see him later that morning and hoped to get an opportunity to ask him about this.

I never knew if I would be there for 15 minutes – about the time it took to manage his ears – or whether he'd offer me tea because he had time to chat. This day, fortune smiled on me. He was sitting in the lounge and, as usual, greeted me warmly. "Ah, doctor, it's so good of you to come and see me." I attended to his ears, and as I packed up my kit we chatted. When there was no-one around, I asked him about this latest piece of news.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked.

"Well, if you have the time."

"No, not at all," he replied – his way of saying, "It's a pleasure".

While I loved this ritual, after almost seven years I still felt slightly awkward about having this extraordinary opportunity adjacent to my professional responsibilities. Madiba would be turning 90 that July and these were precious moments.

We started with the Lockerbie disaster almost 20 years earlier. In December 1988, a bomb exploded on a Pan Am flight over the Scottish town of Lockerbie – parts of the plane crashed into a residential street and 270 people lost their lives. This was the deadliest terror attack in British history and, before 9/11, the biggest for the US.

Although Madiba was still behind bars at the time, he had access to newspapers and would have read about this disaster. He wasn't so much interested in talking about the actual event as in the international negotiations that followed. He played a key role in that period and as he began to describe what had happened, I got the briefest glimpse of what had made him such an extraordinary negotiator.

Libya was a prime suspect in the bombing. Three years after the crash, following a lengthy investigation, arrest warrants were issued for two Libyan nationals. But Gaddafi would not admit culpability and would not hand over the men. When sanctions were piled on his country, he didn't budge, and a decade after the crash he still hadn't given up the men. Madiba was working away in the background, talking to him and others, trying to break the deadlock. He wasn't alone in this.

For most people, Madiba was a benign elder with a conciliatory tone. They never got to feel the steel just below his skin. He saw the world through different eyes and because of his moral authority, very few were able to contest him while he was in power. In his frail final years, and once he'd passed away, people were bolder with their criticism.

That morning, however, he was animated. The discussion wasn't warm; it was principled and left me full of admiration and relief that I had never and would never come up against him.

While his overriding principle was that things must be fair, he understood that human nature is never simple. He had disciplined himself not to judge



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**Peter Friedland and Madiba in the early 2000s.**

Picture: Supplied

people and said negotiations were between human beings, not angels. He often repeated that he was not an angel, and he didn't know anyone who was. Anyway, angelic status was slippery. I can see him leaning forward and saying how a man elevated as an angel in the West could be regarded as a devil in the East. With the reverse being true too, he didn't care for such characterisations.

Much to the chagrin of the West, Madiba had trumpeted his support for the Libyan leader. And the refrain was the same: Gaddafi had supported South Africa's liberation struggle while the great democracies had supported the apartheid regime. Months after his release from prison in 1990, Madiba flew to Libya to thank Gaddafi. Then, in 1994, he invited Gaddafi to South Africa to attend his inauguration as president. He gave short shrift to anyone who looked askance.

Their relationship was strong and in 1997, while quietly working on the Lockerbie negotiation, he visited Libya again, hugged Gaddafi and kissed him on each cheek, saying, "My brother leader, my leader, how nice to see you." The Western press went berserk. The great Mandela was hugging the great murderer – that prison massacre was still fresh in the international mind. Madiba stood firm and told the press he was unimpressed by America's opposition to this mission. "Those who say I should not be here are without morals. I am not going to join them in their lack of morality," he said.

While Madiba's acknowledgment of Gaddafi was causing uncomfortable waves in public, in private he was developing a plan that would dump the British government's decision to put the two men on trial in Scotland, where the 270 deaths had occurred. The British argued that as the tragedy happened there, and it was the place where feeling ran high, it was appropriate the trial should be held there.

Madiba saw it differently. If the two Libyan suspects were to be released to stand trial, he said it

should be conducted in a neutral venue. He knew this would not be popular, but from his own experience he also knew what it would mean for them to be tried in Scotland, in a Western system, with a Western judge, a Western jury and Western legal teams. The implications would be complex.

Behind the scenes, the British argued that holding it in a neutral country would require primary legislation and, given all the procedural complications, the risk of collapse was high. Couldn't the matter of fairness simply be covered by inviting international observers to attend a trial in Scotland? Madiba shook his head. He told me he knew the British foreign office and Prime Minister Tony Blair were annoyed at his involvement in the negotiations and felt he should butt out. In the plainest language, with no hype, he was telling me about manoeuvres on the international stage, just as he might tell me about a backyard dispute between neighbours. He made it sound so simple.

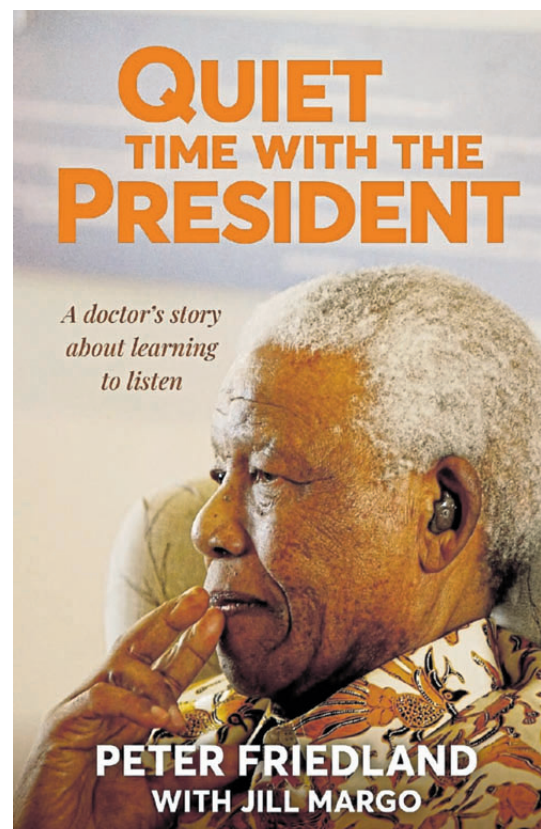
There was one piece he didn't tell me, that I have since learned. Recently released archives show that when the UK foreign office discovered Madiba was visiting Libya en route to the Commonwealth heads of government meeting (CHOGM) in Edinburgh in October 1997, it was alarmed and warned of trouble if he spoke out against plans to hold the trial in Scotland.

Classified documents reveal that Blair attempted to prevent him raising the issue. In a handwritten memo to Madiba, he urged him not to raise his preference for a neutral venue: "Lockerbie is of course a particularly sensitive subject in Scotland because of the deaths on the ground of 11 inhabitants of the small town of Lockerbie, in addition to the 259 people on board the aircraft. So, I hope we can avoid a discussion of the issue at CHOGM itself – we have a lot of other things to talk about. But I would welcome further private discussions when we meet next week."

Although suspicious of each other in Edinburgh,

Madiba and Blair hugged in public. The press went berserk again. But when Madiba stood up to speak, he pointedly ignored Blair's request and disclosed his plan. He asserted that no one nation should be a complainant, prosecutor and judge. He had all but won the day.

The following month, the UK House of Commons was told that as Mandela held unquestioned prestige



for what he had achieved, it behoved the house to listen to what he said on what might be an awkward subject. The house was urged to consider seriously the idea of holding the trial in a third, neutral country.

The following year, Madiba took a swipe at US President [Bill] Clinton, whose disapproval of Gaddafi was well known. Standing next to Clinton at a news conference, Madiba expressed that he would not have his loyalty to the Libyan challenged: "I have also invited Brother Leader Gaddafi to this country. And I do that because our moral authority dictates that we should not abandon those who helped us in the darkest hour in the history of this country ... Not only did the Libyans support us in return, they gave us the resources for us to conduct our struggle, and to win. And those South Africans who have berated me for being loyal to our friends can literally go and jump into a pool."

According to the Los Angeles Times, Clinton didn't flinch. He stood smiling beside Madiba. And he had good reason to smile – negotiations on a compromise were under way. A hybrid solution was later agreed: the trial would be held in the Netherlands, governed by Scottish law. With this in place, Madiba went back to Gaddafi to negotiate the handover of the two men in April 1999.

One was convicted. Former Libyan intelligence officer Abdelbaset al-Megrahi was found guilty in 2001 of mass murder, sentenced to life in prison and later released on medical grounds. In 2023, an older man, Abu Agila Masud, was captured and extradited to the US after confessing in 2013, while in Libyan custody, to having built and delivered the bomb.

Our conversation about Libya had lasted about 45 minutes. No-one had disturbed us and although I was intrigued and reluctant to leave, it was time to go. Walking back to my car, I felt I'd understood something new and replayed bits of the conversation in my mind. The exchange was exciting because his thinking was so unusual. He would travel through several layers to find the human being in a negotiation.

First came the big picture. Here he recognised that Libya had committed atrocities, but he never believed that the Western powers and colonialists had a blameless past. This didn't neutralise the context of the negotiation, but it made operating within it much easier. Nobody had a pure history, and no country could claim to be the policeman of the world.

Next, he seemed to be able separate people from politics. Here were two suspects, schooled in a dictatorship and believing in its ideology. They were about to be tried by people born into a liberal democracy who were convinced that their legal institutions were morally superior.

Third, he took the biblical step of separating the individual from their behaviour. This is in line with the ancient wisdom that says that while God loves all his children, it doesn't mean he loves what they do. Rather than seeing people as inherently evil, Madiba saw them behaving differently, or badly. While no-one was an angel, almost no-one was beyond reform.

He was also concerned with the influence that the angry and bereaved families of Lockerbie could carry in a local courtroom.

This three-step process of reaching the person does not come naturally to most of us, and certainly not to me. Unlike Madiba, most of us are not capable of seeing the individual in the sweep of international affairs.

\* 'Quiet Time with the President: A Doctor's Story about Learning to Listen', by Peter Friedland with Jill Margo, is published by Jonathan Ball Publishers. Author royalties go to Hi Hopes, a charity for deaf and hard of hearing babies and children