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Dr. Harold T. Shapiro, President  
The University of Michigan  
2068 Fleming Administration Building  
Campus

Dear Dr. Shapiro:

I am writing to nominate Mr. Nelson Mandela, of the Republic of South Africa, to receive the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from The University of Michigan. My colleagues and I believe history will show that Nelson Mandela can claim an honored place within the great tradition of those rare men and women who have led movements for human rights and justice in this troubled century.

Recognition of Mandela's personal leadership and sacrifice in the continuing struggle for human rights in South Africa would express our University's deepest commitments and aspirations for human equality and justice at a critical moment in history. Ours would not be the first American institution to confer an honorary degree on Mandela: The City College of The City University of New York honored him with the Hon. LLD in 1983. We, however, would be the first of America's major research universities to recognize Mandela's contribution to human freedom, an honor the University could point to with pride. Thus in honoring Nelson Mandela and through him the disenfranchised people of South Africa whom he represents, The University of Michigan would be exerting its moral leadership and helping to mobilize public opinion while there is still time to influence the course of events. Moreover, this action would significantly enhance the University's earlier one of substantially divesting itself of investments in firms doing business with South Africa.

Despite twenty-one years of imprisonment, Nelson Mandela remains the leading symbol of opposition to the racist government in South Africa. Indeed, a poll conducted this Fall by South Africa's Community Agency for Social Enquiry revealed that Mandela remains "the pre-eminent leader" among black South Africans. His example of courage and dignity in the face of inhuman conditions of confinement and isolation have inspired hope and given strength to the majority of people in South Africa who have been deprived of their most basic rights.

Nelson Mandela was part of a new generation of African leaders who emerged during the spread of independence from colonial rule during the late 1950's. His cohorts in the rest of Africa--people such as Nkrumah, Senghor, and Nyerere to name just three--led their countries in a transition to self-rule and political development. But for South Africa, there was to be no such transition. Instead of democratic self-rule the government of South Africa stubbornly took an opposite path--one of repression and oppression of its own people through an imposition of the blatantly racist policies known as apartheid. In 1964, Nelson Mandela and many fellow African leaders who were national spokesmen for a policy of racial accommodation and democratic reform were imprisoned for life and thus deprived of the opportunity to provide constructive leadership for their society.

Born in 1918 in the Transkei Territory of the Eastern Cape region of South Africa, Mandela attended a Methodist Mission School and the University College of Fort Hare, from which he was expelled in 1940 for taking part in a student strike. He later studied law by correspondence through Witwatersrand University and was awarded a law degree from the University of South Africa in 1942. He has since continued the study of law by correspondence with a University in Britain.

Joining the African National Congress (ANC) in 1944, Mandela served from 1951-52 as president of the ANC Youth League. He next became head of the Transvaal Branch of the ANC as well as the principal deputy to the ANC president, Albert Luthuli, soon to be a Nobel Peace Laureate for his leadership of the struggle against apartheid. Following a seven-year period as a "banned" person for his role in organizing non-violent resistance to the increasingly harsh and racist policies of the South African government, Nelson Mandela emerged once again to lead resistance efforts for the ANC and the newly formed All-African National Action Council.

This public political activity was short-lived. Forced into hiding, he represented the ANC at meetings throughout Africa and Europe until his apprehension by security forces in 1962. Subsequently tried and sentenced to three years in prison, Mandela was tried again in 1964 and sentenced to life imprisonment. Serving as his own legal counsel, he used the occasion of his trial to indict the policies of the South African government before the world. Until 1982, he was confined at the infamous Robbens Island prison and now is at Pollsmore Prison where he is said to be in failing health. His spirit has remained indomitable, however, and according to all accounts, he commands the respect of all who are privileged to come in contact with him.

Despite his suffering and deprivation, Nelson Mandela has not espoused racism in reaction to apartheid. Instead, he has continued to advocate a multi-racial democracy in which all of South Africa's people may participate. For example, at his trial he said, "During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to the struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination

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and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Nelson Mandela, throughout his twenty-one years of imprisonment, has been deprived of the very tools for writing, let alone any other means of communicating directly with the outside world. In the years before his arrest and during his three-year treason trial, however, Mandela had been a prolific author and speaker. The work from this period has been collected in a number of publications which have appeared around the world. [In English, some of these collected works include: No Easy Walk to Freedom: Articles, Speeches and Trial Addresses of Nelson Mandela, (Edited by Ruth First. London and New York: Heinemann); The Struggle Is My Life: His Speeches and Writings Brought Together to Mark His 60th Birthday, (Defense and Aid Fund for Southern Africa: London, 1978); I Am Prepared to Die, (International Defense and Aid Fund for Southern Africa: London, 1979); Nelson Mandela Speaks: Speeches, Statements, and Articles, (Publicity and Information Bureau, African National Congress, 1974).] These speeches and articles clearly demonstrate Mandela's uncommon talent as a writer and rhetorician. They continue to inspire new generations throughout the world. We can only guess how his gifts as a writer would have illuminated the African experience over the past two decades.

We know that because of his continued imprisonment, Mandela will not be able to receive the honorary degree in person. Neither can his wife accept for him because of her status as a "banned" person. This is part of the South African government's grotesque effort to make well-known opponents (those who are "banned") into non-persons who may not travel or live or work where they choose; may not participate in public life; may not even speak with more than one person at a time; nor be publicly referred to or quoted. We, therefore, suggest that the Mandelas' daughter, Zinzi, be invited to accept the degree for Nelson Mandela. She has already traveled to the United States on her father's behalf and can bring a message from him.

Despite the ban on public reference to the Mandelas in South Africa, we know that this gesture by our University will be known and appreciated there as a statement of support by all the people of South Africa--black and white--who are suffering in the cause of human liberty.

Sincerely,

Thomas C. Holt  
Director and  
Professor of History

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