

FW DE KLERK WITHDRAWS HIS ACCEPTANCE OF AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION'S INVITATION

Former President FW de Klerk was recently invited to participate in one of a series of interviews that Jonathan Granoff, the President of the Global Security Institute, has been conducting with the American Bar Association.

We understand that Mr Granoff issued the invitation because of the role that FW De Klerk played in initiating and co-directing South Africa's historic transition from white minority rule to non-racial constitutional democracy; because he is the only national leader who has ever dismantled an existing nuclear arsenal; and for his continuing defence of South Africa's embattled constitution. All these roles should be of considerable interest to any audience that is concerned about the peaceful resolution of long-standing racial conflicts; the promotion of a nuclear weapons-free world; and the evolution of non-racial constitutional democracy.

However, in the current superheated climate relating to issues of race, the invitation has elicited vitriolic reaction from activists in South Africa and the United States. In the process, these activists have once again made outrageous and unfounded allegations against Mr De Klerk.

The role that FW de Klerk played in initiating and co-directing South Africa's transition to non-racial democracy is a matter of historic fact – and was confirmed by Nelson Mandela, in the following remarks that he made at De Klerk's 70th birthday:

“I have had occasion in the past to say that our country does not sufficiently acknowledge the crucial role that FW de Klerk played in bringing us to where we are today... There is almost unchallenged recognition and appreciation that without the courageous foresight of FW de Klerk we might well have descended into the destructive racial conflagration that all were predicting... What more can I add but to repeat what I have said so often over the last sixteen years? You have shown courage as few have done in similar circumstances.”

The allegation that De Klerk was involved in gross violations of human rights is baseless. Despite its diligent investigation of all of the evidence before it, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission failed in its efforts to link him with any such action. However, it appears unacceptable in the current superheated racial climate that any leader from South Africa's troubled past should be permitted to retain the slightest vestige of honour.

Leaders should be judged - not by the situation they inherited from their predecessors - but by their success or failure in wrestling with the historic forces and passions of their times – and by the legacy that they leave to those who come after them. De Klerk has acknowledged that the apartheid system that he inherited from history was 'a crime against humanity' as defined in the Statute of Rome. His contribution was to abolish apartheid and to lead the way to adoption of a non-racial democratic constitution for all South Africans.

Mr De Klerk does not have the slightest interest in participating in any event that will cause him or his hosts embarrassment and had no hesitation in withdrawing his acceptance of the ABA's invitation as soon as he heard of the controversy. This matter is of passing significance for Mr De Klerk. However, it is symptomatic of a growing threat to liberal values everywhere that should be of the deepest concern to all those who still value freedom of speech, toleration of diverse views and the open exchange of ideas on important topics. This would, indeed, appear to be a time when “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

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