

**The Honorable Ronald V. Dellums**  
**U.S. Representative of California (1971–1998)**

**Events: Civil Rights**

**Meeting President Nelson Mandela**

Representative Dellums shares his memories of his first meeting President Nelson Mandela of South Africa.

*Interview recorded June 19, 2012*

And then I thought, “Man, in a few minutes I’m going to meet Nelson Mandela.” So I get ready. And I’d never met Nelson Mandela. Obviously, he was in prison, going all over the country, “Free my people! Free Mandela!” Okay, “Free South Africa!” Suddenly, I’m in this line and there I am. And Bill Gray says, “Mr. Mandela, I would like you to meet Congressman Ron Dellums from California.” This is my impression of Nelson Mandela. You know, and he—remember, he wanted to be a heavyweight prizefighter, so he has big hands. And he, you know, he reached out and—because he did this Hollywood double take. I mean, it was classic double take, and then he—I remember his hands. My arms. And he said, “Ronald Dellums, we have heard much of you. You gave us hope. You kept us alive.” We just hugged each other, and, you know, tears came. Man, how does this man even know me? Had no idea. He was this incredible giant that, you know, was in my mind, that I’m suddenly, he’s saying, “You gave us hope, you kept us alive.” Wasn’t why I did what I did, I did what I did because I thought it was the right thing to do. And we were out there to, to try to help change the world. And bringing the end to apartheid was an important part of it. And here’s this man saying, “You kept us alive.” So we knew of you, and that was so, so humbling and touching.