

THE TRAGEDY OF HISTORY: WHEN CARICATURE DISPLACES THE TRUTH.

By Thabo Mbeki

January 11, 2016

There is a popular view that Winston Churchill once said, "History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it."

However it would seem that what Churchill actually said, speaking at the British House of Commons on 23 Jan 1948, was, "For my part, I consider that it will be found much better by all Parties to leave the past to history, especially as I propose to write that history myself."

Whatever his exact words, Churchill's comments drew attention to the important point that what humanity comes to know about the past relying on written history will be influenced by the political or ideological orientation of the historian or historians.

Inevitably a major conflict such as the Second World War (WWII) was bound to produce many written histories. As he had promised, Churchill did write the history of WWII, producing a series of six books, and was indeed criticised by some for distorting some of the history to put himself in better light.

It was also inevitable that the whole process which led to the defeat of the white minority regime in our country, and the aftermath of this, would also have their own historians, each with his or her political or ideological orientation.

For various reasons many of us who were directly involved in our struggle for liberation have not taken the time to write about this struggle and the subsequent efforts to build a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist South Africa.

One result of this is that people who were essentially observers of both these periods have written much of what has been published about these times, a good part of which has come to be accepted as authoritative and definitive, with no suggestion whatsoever that the authors of these supposedly authoritative and definitive histories had their own political or ideological mind-sets.

Some of this writing has sought to define my character as I served as President of the ANC and the Republic, and argued that this characterisation helps to explain various developments during this period.

Among others, these observers have said that Mbeki was aloof, intellectual, out of touch with the ANC membership and the people, autocratic, intolerant of different views, sensitive to criticism, paranoid, abused state power to promote his personal political ambitions, marginalised the ANC from discharging its responsibilities as the ruling party by centralising power in the State Presidency, and so on.

Much of this is written with no facts to substantiate the accusations or is, in some instances, based on deliberate misinformation.

In many instances this results in a gross distortion of our history and therefore a failure correctly to analyse developments of significant or major importance to the future of our country.

Those of us who had and have more direct information about the processes which are then falsely described by observers as the truth must accept the blame that we have been at fault because of the sustained silence we have maintained when we should have spoken out.

This article is a first but not only attempt to correct this mistake, and will deal with only one instance which has been used to try to give supposed substance to the allegation about Mbeki's so-called paranoia.

Early during my first five years as President of the Republic, one James Nkambule, an ANC Youth League leader from Mpumalanga, approached the SAPS and offered to give the Police detailed information about a conspiracy to do great harm to me as President of the Republic.

The heart of the Nkambule story, conveyed with many details, was that the people involved in this conspiracy were Matthews Phosa, Tokyo Sexwale and Cyril Ramaphosa.

The SAPS Crime Intelligence interviewed Nkambule and recorded his extensive account on a number of video tapes.

At some point the SABC came to know of this story and, as we understood it, prepared to produce its own television documentary of the alleged conspiracy.

It also decided to report this alleged conspiracy in its news programmes.

As part of this news report it invited then Minister of Safety and Security, the late Steve Tshwete, to come to its studios at Auckland Park for an interview on the story.

By then the broadcaster knew the names of the alleged conspirators and, on air, asked Minister Tshwete to confirm the information it had.

The Minister made the serious mistake of confirming these names live on air, during an evening broadcast.

As soon as the interview was over, the Minister telephoned me to inform me of what had happened and to apologise most profusely for his mistake.

Naturally I reprimanded him for what he had done and asked that he should see me.

When we met, we agreed that work would nevertheless have to be done by both the SAPS and the civilian Intelligence Agencies, NIA and SASS, to investigate the authenticity of the Nkambule allegations.

He suggested that for me to understand the gravity of the Nkambule story, I should see and listen to him, to which I agreed.

Nkambule was then brought to me by people who believed the story he had told the SAPS, people who remain members of the current National Executive Committee of the ANC.

However, after listening to him, I remained convinced that the State Intelligence Services should continue their work to establish the truthfulness or otherwise of his allegations.

In this context I asked Minister Tshwete to get me copies of the SAPS video tapes on which they had recorded Nkambule, which he did.

Because of the gravity of the allegations which Nkambule had made, I requested then Deputy President Jacob Zuma, ANC SG Kgalema Motlanthe, Minister Tshwete and Minister Lindiwe Sisulu, then Minister of Intelligence, and perhaps one or two others, to come to the President's Pretoria Official Residence, Mahlambandlopfu, to enable all of us to view the video tapes together.

This we did and took the unanimous decision that I should task Minister Sisulu with the responsibility to get NIA and SASS, which fell under her, to verify or otherwise establish the authenticity of the Nkambule charges, in the same way as would the SAPS Crime Intelligence.

I therefore surrendered the video tapes we had viewed to Minister Sisulu.

It is now a matter of public record that with the Intelligence Agencies having done their work, the late Minister Tshwete then announced that the Agencies had found no truth to what Nkambule had said. He therefore apologised publicly for having wrongly mentioned the names of Phosa, Sexwale and Ramaphosa in the SABC news broadcast.

The fact, therefore, is that neither the Presidency nor anybody in the National Government and the senior leadership of the ANC had initiated any action implicating Phosa, Sexwale and Ramaphosa in any conspiracy.

Once the Nkambule allegations were brought to the attention of, and were reviewed by this leadership, the necessary decisions were taken to assess what were, after all, very serious charges which bore on State security.

At no point did this leadership, including the President, take any position that there was any truth to the allegations, insistent that their veracity had to be established through thorough intelligence investigations and assessments.

The late Minister Tshwete understood without being told even by the President that he should never have confirmed, publicly or privately, the information which the

SABC had that Nkambule had made accusations against Phosa, Sexwale and Ramaphosa, hence his immediate apology to the President immediately after the end of his SABC interview.

The Nkambule saga, which falsely implicated Phosa, Sexwale and Ramaphosa, had nothing whatsoever to do with my alleged paranoia, which the domestic and international media has continuously trumpeted for almost fifteen years now, to date, based on false deductions and pure self-serving speculation.

To avoid being taken aback by all this, perhaps we should have taken more seriously the message which Winston Churchill, the historian, sought to communicate.