VIEWER’S GUIDE AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

MANDELA: LONG WALK TO FREEDOM tells the inspirational story of one of the greatest leaders of our time, Nelson Mandela. From his humble beginnings in Transkei, South Africa, to his incarceration for treason and his eventual release to become president of South Africa, the film provides educators with an important opportunity to help their students understand this inspirational story.

It is important to point out that in any dramatic film production, the story-tellers (i.e. screenwriters, directors, actors, et al.) make decisions on how best to present the story to their audience. Ask students to be aware of this and, where appropriate, identify scenes in the film that may differ from the historical facts they’ve learned and discuss why they think the story-tellers made those choices.

This overview guide was developed for high school students and general audiences. After viewing the film, discuss the questions below in small or large groups. For high school teachers, many of the discussion questions can be used in extension activities including debates or essay writing assignments.

1. Africa during the 20th century. Review these examples and discuss how these incidents created a hierarchy of status between South African whites and blacks. How do these examples compare to racial segregation in the United States after the Civil War and through the 20th century?

2. In the film, Nelson Mandela is portrayed as being reluctant to join the African National Congress when first approached. The film presents a series of incidents involving the death of his friend Dlada Jackson, tensions with his first wife, Evelyn, and the bus boycott in Johannesburg, as reasons for joining the ANC. In reality, Mandela willingly joined the ANC because he was inspired by its leadership and their willingness to address the injustices he saw. Why do you think the film makers chose to tell the story in a way that depicted Nelson Mandela as hesitant to join the organization?

3. The South African government’s response to anti-apartheid demonstrations was violent repression and more restrictive laws. Discuss whether you feel this was a good strategy for suppressing opposition to the government. How do such repressive policies work in countries today, such as those in the Middle East and parts of Africa?

4. Besides the obvious physical attraction shared between Winnie Madikizela and Nelson Mandela, what other factors seem to draw the two of them together? As their relationship matures, how do each of them compliment the other and strengthen not only their commitment to each other, but their mission in life?

5. Discuss the ANC decision to conduct sabotage on government facilities. Why do you think the ANC, which had been committed to a policy of nonviolence for decades, felt it needed to make this move? Does the level of oppression South African blacks were facing at that time justify such a strategy by the ANC?

6. In late 1961, the ANC authorized the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), an armed wing of the organization. Nelson Mandela was tapped to head its operations. Discuss whether this makes Nelson Mandela a traitor or a freedom fighter. Does such a distinction depend on one’s perspective or is such an act devoid of moral equivocation?
7. During the Rivonia trial, Nelson Mandela and two of his co-accused chose to make a statement rather than remain silent or give evidence which opened him to cross-examination. Why do you think they made this decision? What effect do you think it had on the judge in the courtroom? What effect do you think it had on those outside South Africa who were observing this trial? How does this speech redefine the characterization of Nelson Mandela as a criminal?

8. When Nelson Mandela and his accomplices arrive at Robben Island Prison, the reality of their life sentences sinks in. They experience the intimidation of the wardens (prison guards) and the isolation of their prison cells. Discuss how Nelson Mandela confronts this reality with actions of leadership to try to keep his cell mates focused on their overall goal of freedom for black Africans: his interaction with the warders, his demand for long pants, his complaint about the treatment of prisoners, his interaction with the younger prisoners.

9. In 1985, while Nelson Mandela was serving time in Pollsmoore Prison, he was asked by the South African government, to renounce violence in exchange for being released. Discuss why you think this proposal came about and the costs and benefits of Mandela accepting it. Why do you think Mandela ultimately rejected this proposal?

10. After Nelson Mandela rejected President Botha’s proposal to renounce violence in exchange for freedom, Mandela proposed he talk with government officials alone and not with members of the ANC. Why did he agree to enter into these talks, even when his fellow inmates voted that he not talk to the government alone? Why do you think Mandela felt he alone needed to talk to the government and had the confidence to do it?

11. As his time in prison passed, Nelson Mandela began to look at what South Africa should become after Africans were given their freedom and political power. He knew that many black Africans would want revenge against the white population. What were his feelings on getting revenge and why do you think he held this view?

12. In the film, we see the world react to South Africa’s apartheid government and Nelson Mandela’s incarceration in the early 1980s. Media attention came after many decades of apartheid rule and years of imprisonment for Nelson Mandela. Discuss the impact of the media, primarily through television and print, in bringing attention to the world of the injustices of South African regime and Nelson Mandela. What might have been the impact of social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) on these events had they been accessible then and how might the events played out differently?

13. In the film, Nelson Mandela delivers a television address to the people of South Africa at a time of extreme tension. During his address, he mentions that many of his supporters urge him to reject the call for peace. He responds, “There is only one way forward – and that is peace.” He reminds the viewers that he has given his life to the struggle for freedom—twenty-seven years of that in prison—and that he is willing to die for the cause. He tells viewers that in spite of all this, he can forgive the white population for their treatment of him and black South Africans. What do such comments say about Nelson Mandela as a leader?

14. Discuss the bittersweet irony of Nelson Mandela’s victory in ending apartheid and being elected president. What had he gained and what had he lost? Do you think it was worth the effort? Why or why not?