

# Mugabe: a tyrant from the start

Those who say Zimbabwe's president was once a hero are fooling themselves.

By James Kirchick

*Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2007

As Zimbabwe's president, Robert Mugabe, presides over what might be the most rapid disintegration yet of a modern nation-state, it has become *de rigueur* for journalists, politicians and academics to offer what has become a near-universal analysis: Mugabe, who has ruled his country uninterrupted for 27 years, was a promising leader who became corrupted over time by power.

This meme was popularized not long after Mugabe began seizing white-owned farms in 2000. Four years ago, in response to these raids, the *New York Times* editorialized that "in 23 years as president, Mr. Mugabe has gone from independence hero to tyrant." Earlier this week, Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that "I'm just devastated by what I can't explain, by what seems to be an aberration, this sudden change in character."

The characterization of Mugabe as a good man gone wrong extends to popular culture as well. In the 2005 political thriller "The Interpreter," Nicole Kidman played a dashing, multilingual exile from the fictional African country of Matobo, whose ruler was once a soft-spoken, cerebral schoolteacher who liberated his country from a white minority regime but became a despot. Mugabe certainly understood the likeness; he accused Kidman and her costar, Sean Penn, of being part of a CIA plot to oust him.

But this popular conception of Mugabe -- propagated by the liberals who championed him in the 1970s and 1980s -- is absolutely wrong. From the beginning of his political career, Mugabe was not just a Marxist but one who repeatedly made clear his intention to run Zimbabwe as an authoritarian, one-party state. Characteristic of this historical revisionism is former *Newsweek* southern Africa correspondent Joshua Hammer, writing recently in

the liberal Washington Monthly that "more than a quarter-century after leading his guerrilla army to victory over the racist regime of Ian Smith in white-minority-ruled Rhodesia, President Robert Mugabe has morphed into a caricature of the African Big Man."

But Mugabe did not "morph" into "a caricature of the African Big Man." He has been one since he took power in 1980 -- and he displayed unmistakable authoritarian traits well before that. Those who were watching at the time should have known what kind of man Mugabe was, and the fact that so many today persist in the contention that Mugabe was a once-benign ruler speaks much about liberal illusions of African nationalism.

Mugabe's formative political education began in 1964, during a decade of imprisonment for subversive activity against the white minority regime that ruled Zimbabwe, then known as Rhodesia. While imprisoned, Mugabe earned degrees in law and economics by correspondence courses from the University of London and became a revolutionary Marxist. After he was released, he helped lead a civil war against the government.

All the participants in the Rhodesian war used vicious tactics. But Mugabe displayed a particular ruthlessness that ought to have indicated what sort of ruler he might one day become. In 1978, four black moderates announced that they had reached an "internal settlement" with the white regime, paving the way for democratic elections. One of these leaders, Ndabaningi Sithole, dispatched 39 envoys to meet representatives of Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo, another guerrilla leader. The envoys were captured, murdered and, according to Time magazine, "their bodies were then laid out by the guerrillas in a grisly line at the side of the road as a warning to local tribespeople."

The following year, in protest of the election that then-Premier Ian Smith had organized with black leaders willing to lay down their arms, Mugabe's organization released a death list naming 50 "Zimbabwean black bourgeoisie, traitors, fellow-travelers and puppets of the Ian Smith regime, opportunistic running-dogs and other capitalist vultures." During those elections, Mugabe and Nkomo's forces killed 10 black civilians attempting to vote.

Mugabe's men also blew up a Woolworth's store and massacred Catholic missionaries.

Mugabe was clear about his preference for authoritarian rule. Years before taking office, asked what sort of political future he envisioned for Zimbabwe, Mugabe expressed his belief that "the multiparty system . . . is a luxury" and that if Zimbabweans did not like Marxism, "then we will have to re-educate them."

Today, with Zimbabwe suffering the highest inflation and lowest life-expectancy rates in the world, it is fashionable to call Mugabe a "caricature" of an African despot. But Mugabe became that caricature immediately after assuming office. He confiscated about a dozen private companies associated with the rival ZAPU party and expropriated farms that were owned by associates of Nkomo (his erstwhile liberation ally), a harbinger of what he would do to white farmers 20 years later. At a political rally in 1982, Mugabe said about his own political party: "ZANU-PF will rule forever."

In 1984, Mugabe imprisoned Methodist Bishop Abel Muzorewa, who had won the 1979 multiracial election boycotted by Mugabe, for 10 months without charge, falsely accusing him of conspiring against Zimbabwe.

And over several years in the early 1980s, Mugabe executed what arguably might be the worst of his many atrocities, a campaign of terror against the minority Ndebele tribe in which he unleashed a North Korean-trained army unit that killed between 10,000 and 30,000 people.

Yet, even in the midst of these various crimes, Mugabe never lost his fan base in the West. In 1986, the University of Massachusetts Amherst bestowed on Mugabe an honorary doctorate of laws just as he was completing his genocide against the Ndebele. In April of this year, as the campus debated revoking the degree it ought never have given him, African American studies professor Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, who had been in favor of honoring Mugabe two decades ago, told the Boston Globe: "They gave it to the Robert Mugabe of the past, who was an inspiring and hopeful figure and a humane political leader at the time." Similarly, in 1984, the

University of Edinburgh gave Mugabe an honorary doctorate (revoked in July of this year), and in 1994, Mugabe was inexplicably given an honorary knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II.

What explains the revisionist account of Mugabe? Partly, it is what might be termed the West's "Orientalist" view of Zimbabwe. According to this interpretation, it was only when Mugabe started going after whites that the world began paying attention. The anti-white violence of the early 2000s took no more than a dozen white lives and the lives of many more black farm workers -- peanuts compared with the thousands of Ndebeles slaughtered in the mid-'80s.

The British media, which nurture a residual interest in a former colony where many people of British ancestry still live, helped turn Mugabe into an international villain when he began killing white people. In the eyes of Westerners, tribal violence -- in which blacks kill other blacks -- is par for the course in Africa, and, besides, Mugabe actually killed far fewer of his people than many other African despots. That Mugabe did not immediately ruin Zimbabwe's economy or force the whites out -- as Idi Amin did in Uganda -- is a large part of why the West did not portray him as a villain. By African standards, he really was not all that bad.

Still, this does not account for the overt whitewashing of Mugabe's horrific past. Throughout the Rhodesian civil war in the 1970s, many in the media attempted to portray Mugabe as akin to Nelson Mandela, the quintessence of the heroic, international statesman. Months after his election in 1980, the New York Times opined that "Mr. Mugabe has quickly established himself as an African statesman of the first rank." The media already had its villain -- Rhodesia's intractable whites -- and portraying Mugabe as just another African strongman bent on turning his country into a one-party dictatorship would have complicated the story of good versus evil.

Mugabe was also a brilliant and eloquent spokesman for black African grievances against colonial rule and for post-colonial aspirations of independence and self-sufficiency. And it's true that after taking office, he preached racial reconciliation rather than

retribution, surprising many whites. But a fully honest accounting also would have recognized Mugabe to be, whatever his virtues, an authoritarian thug hellbent on acquiring -- and attaining -- power at all costs. Mugabe's destructive behavior over the last seven years has not been "an aberration" but is perfectly consistent with the way he has ruled Zimbabwe since 1980.

In 2000, at the start of Mugabe's seizures of white land, New York Times columnist (and early Mugabe fan) Anthony Lewis admitted, on behalf of quite a few journalists, diplomats and academics in the West, "how wrong we were" about Mugabe. But he offered the qualification, "at least over time." Lewis, and everyone else who ever feted Mugabe, was not just proved wrong about the despot "at least over time." They were wrong the minute they endorsed him.

James Kirchick is assistant to the editor in chief of the New Republic and reported from Zimbabwe last year.