

F.W. de Klerk Interview

TIME IN CODE	QUESTIONS	CONTENT	TIME OUT CODE
00:02:34:05	How did growing up in a political family influence you? Did you always know that you will be a lawyer and that you will be in politics?		00:03:00:03
00:03:00:11		I grew up in quite a political family, my father was a headmaster of a school but entered politics when he was about 47 and became a minister under three consecutive prime ministers. His sister was married to the former prime minister J.G. Strijdom, my two grandfathers were involved in politics and my great grandfather was in the first senate after the 1910 unification of South Africa, so around the dinner table, at lunch tables and over weekends, the family spoke politics and at a very young age, I said, I want to study law but I don't want to become a typical lawyer, I want to become a political lawyer. So from my youth I was committed to public service, I was brought up that way by my parents and I had the ideal of one day making a difference, however, when I completed my studies I was in a hurry to get into politics. My father was then the minister, he said to me, no, you must never become a professional politician, politics is not a profession, it's a calling. First go and make a success, was his advice to me, of your chosen profession, become a successful lawyer and then one day you might enter politics but if you fill in a form when you enter politics, you must never write in, I am a politician, you must say, I am a lawyer by training, it was the best advice I ever received. So I went to university, I completed my legal studies and I practiced law fulltime until I was 37 years old.	00:05:03:00
00:05:03:10	What happened after the 37 years?		00:05:05:08
00:05:05:15		I was very active as a lawyer in civil affairs, I was also active in my political party, which was then the National Party, I was the chairman of my party and at 36 [years-old], Potchefstroom University offered me a professorship and I decided to take it and I gave notice to my partners in the legal firm, which was called De Klerk, Vermaak and Partners and as I was working my notice out, the Member of Parliament of Vereeniging	00:06:13:05

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		was made Ambassador to Rome and there was a vacancy and my party came to me and said, but we trained you all these years, we want you to be our new Member of Parliament and I had to make a choice then between changing my career to a political career or changing my career to an academic career and my choice was the political career.	
00:06:14:10	When you entered into politics, what did you see your role being as a politician, what kind of change did you want to bring?		00:06:27:15
00:06:28:03		When I entered politics, it was actually the beginning, not because I entered politics, but it was the beginning of a phase of reform of apartheid and I was very convinced that we needed to reform apartheid. The petty apartheid measures of separate entrances at post offices and so on offended me, I was against it so I was very happy to enter politics in a phase when we were starting to look at ourselves in the ruling party, when we were starting to do deep self-analysis and I became part and parcel, even in the years that I was a back bencher, before I became a minister of this process of self-analysis, which took place within the National Party. In my years in politics, before I became president, more than a hundred apartheid laws were repealed and I was part of the repealing, I repealed some laws which my father put on the statute book, so I was part of a reformed phase in the National Party and I was very committed towards reform throughout my political career. I was classified as a conservative, there was a liberal wing and I didn't form part of their little clique, there was a right wing I didn't form part of their little clique, I was never part of a clique within the National Party, you could have described me as a centrist, I was, outside, loyal to the party policy and, inside, I preached and tried to promote reform.	00:08:22:10
00:08:23:15	Because you repealed some of the laws that you father had put in the statute books, did that cause tension in your relationship with him?		00:08:36:13

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00:08:36:23		My father understood my position, however, he died about a year after I became minister and the repealing of the laws that he put on the statute book took place after his death but I am convinced that he would have understood the necessity of the National Party totally repositioning itself and admitting and recognizing the injustice which apartheid brought to the majority of the people in South Africa.	00:09:14:01
00:09:15:05	Who were some of your heroes growing up, whether in your political space or worldwide figures, people you looked up to and admired?		00:09:32:23
00:09:33:01		I grew up in a phase which was not so long after the Anglo-Boer War and I grew up with a belief and I still believe it to a great extent today that the Anglo-Boer War was an unjust war regarding my people, the Afrikaners, so some of my heroes were General de Wet, General de la Rey, the Boer Generals who were so ingenuous in fighting the mightiest army on earth at that stage in history. I had heroes at school, my Latin teacher was my hero, we could argue for hours when I didn't do my Latin homework about the role of Napoleon, it was my task to draw his attention away from the lesson that we had and to have a general discussion about affairs. But in my public life I never modelled myself on any specific person, but in my years as a minister and specifically as president I had developed the greatest of admiration for a number of people, for Gorbachev, if he didn't do what he did I might not have been able to make the speech which I made on the 2 nd of February 1990, Lee Kuan Yew who changed Singapore into a city state, one of the freest economies in the world, if he didn't take the initiatives he took, I admired him for those initiatives, Singapore might just still have been a city in the state of Malaysia. I admired Maggie Thatcher, she knew what she wanted, she was a principled politician and she was fearless. I admired Helmut Kohl and I liked very much George Bush senior, who was a wonderful administrator but not a good politician.	00:11:45:01
00:11:46:06	When you first started as minister, did you know your		00:12:01:05

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	trajectory was to the presidency or did it come as a surprise to you?		
00:12:04:05		When I entered politics, obviously like all young Members of Parliament, my ambition was to become a minister, after 5 years I was made a full minister, I've never been a deputy minister which I appreciated very much, that recognition was given to the role that I was playing in Parliament. Quite soon I became the leader of the National Party in the Transvaal, after the split of the National Party and the right wing broke away and that elevated me to one of the candidates for the presidency should a vacancy occur, that happened in 1982 so in a sense since '82 it was as if I might have been destined to become a future leader of my party and thus as long as we won the elections, president of the country, and this is how it happened.	00:13:14:20
00:13:15:21	Can you tell me about the first time you ever encountered a black African who was almost your peer, do you remember anything like that, do you remember the first time you had a meaningful interaction with someone outside of your race?		00:13:56:18
00:13:58:03		In the years of apartheid, it was as if people lived in compartments, so in my younger years I wasn't really exposed to intellectual black people and so on, I was taught to have respect for my elders irrespective of their race or colour, my father had a little farm and the people who worked there, I respected the seniors and I had playmates amongst their children, young black kids and we swam together in the dam and we shot at birds together, we played together. My first real exposure was at university, I was a leader of the Afrikaans Student Society at my university and countrywide and we invited Albert Luthuli to come and address us, the university would not allow him to speak to us on campus so we arranged a venue outside campus and I met him and we listened	00:16:15:10

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		to him but we didn't take what he had to say seriously enough. Also as a student leader I was exposed to international situations with black students and we entered into debates and the likes. But then again, really my first real exposure to black leaders came when I became a minister and in my portfolios I had to deal with black trade union leaders, I had to deal with black leaders active in the fields in which my portfolios fell and then of course when I became president, I entered into dialogue, more meaningful dialogue with blacks than dialogue has ever been in the South Africa in which I grew up.	
00:16:17:03	Leading up to your first meeting with Nelson Mandela on the 13 th of December what were your intentions in terms of meeting with him? And when was the first time the name Mandela entered your consciousness growing up? And what were your expectations going into a meeting with him?		00:16:42:01
00:16:42:13		Firstly, as a young lawyer, of course during his trial I followed it closely and felt that he had a fair trial and then I constantly took note as protests started to mount about his incarceration and as he became an international figure, as he became, even while in jail, an icon, I took note of all of that but as a practicing leading politician within the governing party he became more into my focus about a year or two before I became president. I was quietly briefed, although the cabinet was never fully briefed, but I was quietly informed and I followed it with interest about the exploratory talks which he had with Kobie Coetsee and with Fanie van der Merwe and with General Willemsse and with Niel Barnard so I was in the know about what was taking place. Then I became leader of the National Party on the 2 nd of February '89, exactly a year before I made the speech in 1990 and then from there on I was absolutely fully briefed because I was in a sense president elect, president Botha stayed	00:20:51:11

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		<p>on as president but it was clear that he couldn't really continue because of the serious stroke he had. So I was briefed that Botha would have a meeting with Mandela, I was briefed about the outcome of that, I was briefed about the preparatory talks that Mandela had while in jail, exploring the possibility of negotiations, so when I met him in December '89, it was my initiative to meet him and he was brought under the cover of darkness from the little house in which he lived at that stage at the Victor Verster Prison, under cover of darkness, parked into my parking space, came up in the private presidential lift to my offices which would later become his offices and we had a very good meeting, we didn't discuss at that first meeting anything of real substance, of the things we would later negotiate about. He was telling me a lot about his admiration for the Boer Generals, but we were feeling each other out, we were talking about important things but not relevant to the political crisis of the day. And both of us could later write in our respective autobiographies, after that first meeting a feeling developed, I can do business with this man, I can walk a path with this man and that never disappeared although there were tensions between us later on but at all times when our negotiators called on us, we could rise above those tensions, take hands, put our heads together and find solutions for what seemed to be irresolvable problems.</p>	
00:20:52:11	<p>What's the quality that stood out about Mandela, what's the number one observation you made about him beyond being confident that you can do business with him?</p>		00:21:04:10
00:21:04:15		<p>At that first meeting I was impressed by his dignity, he sort of was taller than I expected but he held himself up with pride. I was impressed by his analytical way of approaching whatever we discussed and felt in step with him because I'm also analytical, when I look at any issue. He was a good listener, I liked that in him, I think training as a lawyer brings that out of you, you listen to your client before you jump to conclusions. So I felt sort of a spark on various levels with him at that very first meeting.</p>	00:21:57:08

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00:21:57:10	Did you know that 2 months later you would be releasing him, at that moment when you first met?		00:22:03:11
00:22:03:20		It was already in my mind when I first met Mr. Mandela, it was clear that he had to be released. I was not ready to discuss his release with him, I planned my speech of the 2 nd of February 1990 from the beginning, from the date almost that I became president. I and my team decided we must take some daring initiatives, those initiatives came together in a Bush Conference which I held with my cabinet earlier in December, I think it was earlier, I am not so sure about the date, and I spent December and January quietly to put together the detail of the package, which I announced on the 2 nd of February 1990 but when I met him early December 1989, I was clear in my mind that he would be released early in 1990.	00:23:08:00
00:23:08:16	What needed to happen politically on your side before you could announce that decision on the 2 nd of February so between December and February what was your preoccupation at that time?		00:23:23:05
00:23:23:16		I was preoccupied from the moment that I became the president in September 1989 with putting together a package, which I wanted to announce at the opening of parliament on the 2 nd of February 1990, which would strip the ANC of any excuse not to come to the negotiation table, I was committed to initiate meaningful negotiations and I had at a very early stage in my presidency, long before the 2 nd of February 1990, realised that I would have to unban the ANC, not only release Mr. Mandela, release all political prisoners and I would have to deal with various other issues which the ANC could offer as an excuse to say thank you for doing all this but until you do this and this we won't come and talk and the package which I announced on the 2 nd of February 1990 was	00:25:28:05

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		<p>put together to rob them of any excuse, as I've said, not to come and sit down, that was an initiative from our side and that prepared the ground for the negotiations which followed but president Mandela, after his release, also took an initiative which consolidated the platform for negotiations when he led his party without negotiating it with us to suspend the armed struggle, those two initiatives, the ones that I announced on the 2nd of February 1990 and the suspension of the armed struggle, set up the platform from which meaningful and successful negotiations could take place.</p>	
00:25:28:18	<p>How do you see that interplay between the international landscape and where you were when you assumed the presidency, did you feel some kind of pressure from the international community?</p>		00:26:00:00
00:26:03:18		<p>The fall of the Berlin wall, opened for me and the National Party, a window of opportunity to unban also the South African Communist Party because communism lost its strength, it was no longer the same threat which it used to be. Russia, the USSR before the Berlin wall came down and before Gorbachev became its president, had a strategy to get direct or indirect control of the whole of Southern Africa, it wasn't just a dream, it wasn't just political propaganda, they had a strategy and it's been proven since, through access to some of the archives, that this was their strategy but when the USSR fell apart and the Berlin wall came down, the threat of Russian expansionism fell away and that helped me and the National Party to take bolder steps that otherwise we wouldn't have been able to do. It was not a question of international pressures or international attitudes, pressures of Russia between America and Russia and Great Britain and Russia and so on, that wasn't involved in helping us when Gorbachev took his initiatives. It was an African issue, an African issue of Russian strategy to get direct or indirect control of the whole of Southern Africa, Russian strategy which then became a failed strategy and which no longer held the same threat as it used to do.</p>	00:28:09:13

00:28:09:21	How hard was it to sell the idea of the package that you were going to announce on the 2 nd to the different cliques within the National Party?		00:28:22:23
00:28:23:21		<p>One of my biggest challenges throughout my presidency, from the beginning to the end, was to take my constituency along with me. My first team, my cabinet was with me when I announced what I announced on the 2nd of February 1990 because we regularly met, even under circumstances of where we were almost on an island, we called it in Bush Conferences, where your cell phone wouldn't work, you had no excuse not to be there, we looked each other in the eye and we talked very frankly and each one had an opportunity to give his/her opinion irrespective of what it was and there we built a consensus, so I had my first team behind me, I wasn't standing alone in what I announced on the 2nd of February 1990, I had a mandate from the leadership of my party. Immediately after I made the speech, I called a caucus, all the National Party parliamentarians together and said, I couldn't take you into my confidence beforehand because I wanted this package to come as a surprise and as an initiative but you've heard me now, are you with me? And unanimously they said yes and I told them, your task is now to go and convince the people who voted you into Parliament that this is the right way to go, this is also in their best interests and they did that but constantly I had to take my constituency along. And then there was this phase, because the Conservative Party on my right under Andries Treurnicht was saying I didn't have a mandate for what I was doing and then I started losing my elections in constituencies where the Member of Parliament died or they resigned or was appointed Ambassador or whatever, constituencies which we won in the '89 elections suddenly we started losing to the Conservative Party and then they said to me, you no longer have a mandate, you must resign and call an election, look how you are losing election after election and I said no, I will call a referendum and I posed the simple question, you know now what I am doing, this was in March 1992, must I go ahead with it, yes or no? And</p>	00:31:21:06

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		when confronted with that question, 69% of the white electorates said, yes, go ahead, that refreshed my mandate and it ended the debate about whether I have a sufficient mandate for what I was doing.	
00:31:21:18	Can you walk us through the day of 2 nd of February 1990 from the moment you woke up, and you making the statement that South Africa will never be the same again, what did you have in mind when you made that statement? And do you think other aspects of your speech were overlooked and people just focused on the release of Mandela?		00:32:09:08
00:32:10:08		In the preparation of the speech of the 2 nd of February 1990, I worked very hard on this specific formulation in the week before and I did it in Afrikaans and then it was translated into English, certain parts of the speech I delivered in Afrikaans and certain parts in English but the major announcements were in English because the whole international press was also in South Africa at that time. They were just expecting the release of Mr. Mandela, none of the other stuff. So the day before the speech was almost, I would say, finalised and I went to the 60 th birthday party of a very good friend of mine on the evening of the 1 st and proposed a toast to him. When I came back, I went to my office for the last time and read the final speech with all the language corrections which had been made and went to bed at midnight, I was sure I was doing the right thing so I didn't lose sleep, I sleep well, short but well. Got up the next morning but I fully realised that this would change South Africa forever, I told my wife so as we walked into Parliament, she didn't know what I was going to say, I made all my cabinet ministers promise when I gave them the copy of the speech not to tell even their wives. Why did I think and say it would change South Africa forever? Because I	00:34:52:06

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		was announcing the end of separate development, I was announcing the end of apartheid, I was announcing a new vision of one united South Africa with an equal vote for everybody, a united South Africa in which all forms of discrimination would be removed from the statute book, I was announcing an inclusive South Africa, a total break of the concepts of separateness and a total embracement of the concept of togetherness, so it was a cliff hanging moment for South Africa, we crossed the Rubicon with that speech.	
00:34:53:05	Where were you on the 11 th of February?		00:34:55:20
00:34:58:00		It was a Sunday, if I remember correctly, I went to church as I usually do and then I had lunch with a friend who was also a pastor and then we looked at the release from jail on his TV at his home and I kept out of the public eye totally and realised this day is Mr. Mandela's day, didn't try to engage with the press in any way whatsoever and made myself, to a certain extent, unavailable.	00:35:47:03
00:35:48:00	And when was the first time you met with Mandela to speak post his release?		00:35:52:23
00:35:53:18		I met Mr. Mandela the first time in December '89, the second time I met him just after my speech on the 2 nd of February 1990 to advise him that he would be released on the 11 th of February and I was astounded by his reaction, he said, no, I don't want to be released on the 11 th of February, I said why not? He said it's too soon, we need more time to prepare and I remember telling him that, Mr. Mandela you and I will negotiate about many things but you've been in jail long enough, this is not negotiable, you will be released on the 11 th , lets discuss where and what time of the day and he gave a smile and preferred to be released at the Victor Verster and not in Johannesburg as we had planned and said midday and that was in good spirit. The first time I really met him then, after his release, was in April at the Groote Schuur Conference where I led a small team and he led a small team from both sides and we started to find the pattern on which we would negotiate and we decided very importantly that lets first try and find out on what do we agree and we were	00:38:13:08

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		astounded when we found that actually we agreed upon more things than we anticipated and right through the negotiations for a very long time we followed that pattern of enlarging the list of what we agreed upon, pushing the more difficult issues, where we differed vehemently at times, lower down the agenda and said we'll come back to that later and then we reached the tipping point where we agreed upon so many things that it was just unthinkable that we shouldn't find agreement about those things that we still differed about.	
00:38:14:01	Was Groote Schuur and the Pretoria minute seminal moments for you in terms of giving you confidence?		00:38:18:21
00:38:19:08		Absolutely, Groote Schuur and the Pretoria minute and there was also an important meeting at the D.F. Malan Airport, as it was then called, the Cape Town Airport, were seminal moments in the whole negotiations process, this is where the concept of CODESA was born.	00:38:39:16
00:38:41:10	What was the first indication that things might fall apart here, when did you first get that sense?		00:39:12:18
00:39:13:21		When one is involved in such major negotiations as we were involved in South Africa, there comes a time when things move almost beyond your control, like when you are in a canoe and the rapid takes you and what you can then do when that rapid takes you is just to stay upright and if the canoe turns over, just to get it turned upwards again and there were such moments in the negotiations process, the most important one was when the ANC walked out in the middle of 1992 and said they were going to make South Africa ungovernable through rolling mass action, they called it the Leipzig option, like it happened in East Germany and we tried to calm it down, my main negotiator Mr. Roelf Meyer never stopped liaising with Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa, the then main negotiator for the ANC, and through those two, Mr. Mandela and I were kept informed and did not lose contact and in September 1992, after what I regard as an avoidable massacre, which took place in Bisho, then we got together	00:41:37:20

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		again and there's the wrong impression that I made major concessions at that September meeting when we got together again, it's not true. If one analyses the document which was agreed upon, it was just a reiteration of what we've already agreed upon until the ANC walked out of CODESA. On other issues, [there were] some concessions from my side which led to Buthelezi leading the IFP out of the negotiations but on the constitutional issues there was no concession made by me in September 1992 in order to get the ANC back into the negotiations forum.	
00:41:37:23	How do you look back on the violence of that era? What would you like to say about the violence, the third force, and the Goldstone Commission in that period?		00:41:56:05
00:42:06:18		An ongoing serious problem throughout the negotiation process was ongoing violence, especially between the ANC and the IFP. I was accused by Mr. Mandela of either looking away and allowing the violence to take place or not being in control of the security forces, later it came out elements of the security forces were involved in activities which were totally against my policy, which I prohibited, which I stopped when I became president and the Goldstone Commission was appointed by me to find out whether there's truth in those allegations and he did open the can of worms and I gave him every support that he ever needed and that led to the suspension, early retirement and steps against 28 very senior officers in the military so yes, there was this element but there was also violence fermented by ANC elements and by IFP elements, they were killing each other, especially in KwaZulu Natal and at the hostels in the East Rand of Gauteng.	00:43:42:06
00:43:42:21	Can you tell me the top 3 negotiating points for the National Party, what did you want out of the process, what did you want reflected in the		00:43:57:23

	interim Constitution and ultimately in the final Constitution?		
00:43:59:06		The most important issue for the National Party was that we should become a constitutional state in which there would be a Constitution which would be the highest law of the land, which would be looked over by a Constitutional Court who would have the final say on constitutional matters, that we would achieve a good Constitution. The second important point was that we would like to see proper separation of powers and independent courts adjudicating and an executive and a national executive and a legislative authority and Parliament and that there should be clear cut lines between those three institutions, each one is independent. And the third big issue was for us to see that the diversity of South Africa's population is properly accommodated within the Constitution, we have many minorities, it's not just a black and white issue in South Africa and that minorities would be accepted as building blocks of a greater whole and that there will no longer be any second-class citizens in any way whatsoever, the injustice of apartheid should not be repeated in the new South Africa in just another form, that was for us also fundamentally important therefore the recognition of all the languages in the Constitution, the recognition of the right to mother tongue education, where it is practicable and provided it is not used to exclude anybody from education and many other cultural rights which are written into the Constitution. There's a fourth one, that property rights should be properly protected because that's the foundation of any successful economy so, in that sense of the word, we were absolutely insistent on effectively protecting private property ownership which was done also in both the interim and the final Constitution.	00:46:51:10
00:46:51:14	All in all, you happy with the final Constitution?		00:46:54:13
00:46:54:21		All in all, I am happy with the final Constitution. I would have liked to see a continuance, in some form or another, of a consensus-seeking model at the executive level and we made proposals especially between '94 and '96 to have, next to any future cabinet, a consultative council to	00:47:52:21

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		<p>which any future government should refer issues of national importance in an effort to find a consensus, how should this issue be dealt with? Rather than the majority party just saying, this is my policy, this is what I am going to implement, to avoid typical majoritarian rule, the ANC said no to that and that is what I regard as my one failure in the negotiations.</p>	
00:47:55:10	What does the Constitution mean to you on a personal level?		00:48:01:23
00:48:02:10		<p>The Constitution to my mind is the best assurance that South Africa has for a safe future as long as we adhere to it. It's a solemn pact that was entered into between former enemies to say this is the cornerstone and the foundation on which we will build a new South Africa, this is what it means to me personally and this is what I think it means to the country and it is for that reason that I started the F.W. de Klerk Foundation in which I have a centre for constitutional rights.</p>	00:48:47:11
00:48:58:00	You had that famous clash with Nelson Mandela on the first day of CODESA, how do you look back on that moment now? How did the relationship bounce back from that moment?		00:49:13:00
00:49:25:00		<p>At the launch of CODESA there was a big clash between Mr. Mandela and me, I was the last speaker and I strongly accused the ANC of dragging its feet on security issues, the background to that was that the ANC was not complying with its undertakings and that a week before the launch of CODESA, there were members in my cabinet which said we could not go ahead with CODESA and my decision was no, we will go ahead but I will make on that issue a strong statement and I instructed the minister to advise Mr. Mandela to expect such a strong statement. Today I am convinced that that message never got through to him and that he thought I was misusing the opportunity and became very cross and stood up and objected very strongly and insulted me quite strongly, it took a lot of self-containment on my behalf not to react very sharply</p>	00:51:19:10

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		too because I had grounds on which I could have done but to save the process, I was conciliatory in my reply. Immediately afterwards as we met outside he was conciliatory too and it was one of the examples where we found it possible to rise above tensions and above differences, to take hands and to move on forward together.	
00:51:20:05	How did you feel when he passed away?		00:51:21:16
00:51:22:15		Sad, we attended his funeral of course, you know after his retirement especially, we really became good friends, we spoke with each other on the phone, we had lunches at each other's homes and dinners, we even collected funds for both parties together from companies.	00:51:52:00