



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on September 18, 2022

## “I Wasn’t Arrested” Trying to See Nelson Mandela, Biden Tells South Africa’s President

President Joe Biden told South African President Cyril Ramaphosa that, contrary to claims he made on the 2020 campaign trail, he was never arrested while trying to visit Nelson Mandela in prison.

According to the [Daily Mail](#), during a joint appearance at the White House Friday, Biden told Ramaphosa of an incident that occurred in 1990, shortly after Mandela’s release from prison.

“I was a senator at the time, and we met in the Senate Foreign Relations executive committee room,” said Biden. “And [Mandela] came in [and] we all stood there and said hello to him and the like and afterwards, he asked if he could come by my office and he came by to say thank you because he heard I had been stopped trying to get to visit him, to see him in prison.”

“I wasn’t arrested,” Biden added. “I got stopped, prevented from moving.”

No doubt the president felt the need to add that caveat after he got caught embellishing the story of a mid-1970s trip to South Africa during his 2020 campaign in an apparent effort to win black votes.

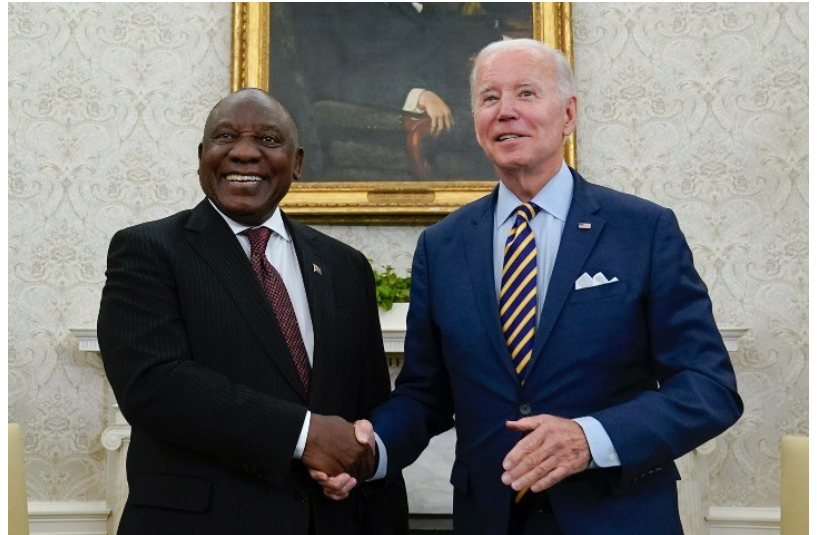
“This day, 30 years ago, Nelson Mandela walked out of prison and entered into discussions about apartheid. I had the great honor of meeting him. I had the great honor of being arrested with our U.N. ambassador on the streets of Soweto trying to get to see him on Robbens Island,” Biden said at a February rally in Columbia, South Carolina.

Later that month, at a campaign event in Las Vegas, Biden recalled, “After [Mandela] got free and became president, he came to Washington and came to my office. He threw his arms around me and said, ‘I want to say thank you.’ I said, ‘What are you thanking me for, Mr. President?’ He said, ‘You tried to see me. You got arrested trying to see me.’”

A few days later, also in Sin City, Biden once more said he’d been “arrested for trying to see” the imprisoned Mandela.

Such claims, which Biden had never made before, were too much even for the mainstream media to ignore. [The New York Times](#), [The Washington Post](#), and [PolitiFact](#), among others, expended quite a bit of effort debunking them.

The *Post*’s “Fact Checker,” Glenn Kessler, noted that Biden’s recollection of being arrested in Soweto is rather jumbled. Soweto, a township near Johannesburg, is nearly 900 miles from Robben



AP Images  
Cyril Ramaphosa and Joe Biden



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— not Robbens — Island, which is off the coast of Cape Town. He appears to be referring to a trip in 1977, but the U.N. ambassador from 1977 to 1979, Andrew Young, told The Fact Checker that he was never arrested in South Africa.

“There is no chance I ever was arrested in South Africa, and I don’t think Joe was, either,” said Young....

He speculated that Biden was mixing up stories about congressional delegations that would fly into Lesotho, a landlocked country surrounded by South Africa.... Young said that on one trip, “we were not jailed, but we were retained by South Africa police,” who would not let the lawmakers get back to a military base in Lesotho so they could board their plane.

Asked about his claims by CNN in 2020, Biden changed his tune a bit, saying the entire congressional delegation had been forced off a plane by South African police — still a little odd considering they always flew into and out of Lesotho — and that, as the only white member of the delegation, he refused to be segregated from his black colleagues. He also claimed that “when I said ‘arrested,’ I meant I was not able to move.... I guess I wasn’t arrested, I was stopped.”

However, then-Representative Don Bonker (D-Wash.), another white member of the delegation, told Kessler he had “no recollection at all” of any such incident and added that there were other whites in the delegation besides Biden and himself. (Four of the 11 delegates were white.)

Biden appears to have gotten the message that he can’t go on saying he was arrested while attempting to visit Mandela. Americans now await the next “misstated” chapter of the president’s life story. As the *Daily Mail* observed, “Biden has a [long history](#) of exaggerating his own biography.”



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