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Message to my Social Studies Class:

Last week was our first class together, and we got a chance to review and discuss the events of September 11, 2001 and how that day impacted the world and the way the United States executed its foreign policy going forward. Today, I would like to share another September 11th that happened 24 years earlier. It was in South Africa, and on that morning the beaten and shackled body of Stephen Biko was found in front of a hospital; he was barely alive and would die the next day September 12, 1977.

You may not know the name Stephen Biko. As I prepared for this class yesterday and this morning, I could not find a single person who would admit to knowing the name Stephen Biko. Without Stephen Biko, you would not know the name Nelson Mandela.

Stephen Biko was born in 1946 when South Africa looked a lot like it looked when I was born fifteen years later; that is not the South Africa of today. South Africa was politically stable, wealthy by international standards, and entirely controlled by a minority population. That minority population had lived in South Africa for almost 600 years, but it was white, the majority was black, and before Stephen was three years old the government adopted a policy of "apartness" that would endure for the next thirty years.

Stephen was a good student, but he also saw the injustice in a system that denied people of his skin color the opportunities enjoyed by the minority. His path of progress was one of a student activist, and when his activism made continuing his time as a student impossible in South Africa, he completed his education in nearby Natal.

While the Mandelas of South Africa were aligning with forces of violence and being imprisoned, Biko was building the student organizations and then migrating the power built in the universities into the urban communities of South Africa. The government knew how to jail suspected terrorist, like Mandela, but had no clear plan to silence Biko.

Each time Biko was arrested, he was released until an arrest on August 18, 1977. Twenty four days later and 740 miles from the site of Stephen Biko's arrest, his beaten shackled body was in front of a hospital. His death, the next day, ignited a world that had already condemned the current South African government and a failed system. After Stephen Biko, the government of South Africa dared not make a move to harm the life of any figure associated with freedom and change. After Stephen Biko, Nelson Mandela's days in prison would end, and he was never in danger again.

I remember Stephen Biko. I remember when an artist captured his heroism in a song. To most, he is forgotten today, but what he did remains.

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