

## Malcolm X: Activist and Leader

By Rev. Dr. Stephen Ohnsman, Ph.D.

Malcolm X has often been demonized by Christians and Muslims, but his impact on the Civil Rights movement is important in its scope and influence. While Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of his dream, X focused on the nightmare that people of African descent had experienced at the hands of white Americans. In his excellent book, “Malcolm and Martin”<sup>1</sup>, James Cone looked at how both men, coming from opposing views initially, found common ground as the Civil Rights movement moved forward. Malcolm became increasingly disturbed by the corruption within the Nation of Islam, and after his pilgrimage to Mecca, moved closer to an understanding with King’s point of view. King, meanwhile, grew increasingly frustrated with the roadblocks he faced as he attempted to work against war and poverty.

Malcolm was born in 1925 to Rev. Earl and Mrs. Louise Little. They lived in Omaha, Nebraska where Rev. Little was a Baptist minister and an organizer for Marcus Garvey’s Back to Africa Movement. There were a number of occasions when Rev. Little was threatened by local Klan members, and the family believed that he died when Malcolm was 6 years old at the hands of one of those hate groups<sup>2</sup>. Malcolm’s mother was placed in an institution a couple of years later, and Malcom spent the rest of his youth being shuttled from one foster care parent to another, including numerous institutions. He joined the Nation of Islam while in prison, becoming one of that groups most effective recruiters and spokesmen<sup>3</sup>.

Malcolm and Martin met just once; it was following a Senate debate on the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Martin had just held a press conference, and he met Malcolm in the hallway, pausing to speak with him and to shake his hand. King was criticized for taking X’s hand but explained that love should move us to work towards reconciliation with those we disagree with. Malcolm’s assassination in

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<sup>1</sup> Cone, J. (1991). *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon, L. (2017). *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920’s and the American Political Tradition*. Liveright Publishing Company, New York.

<sup>3</sup> X, Malcolm; Haley, A. (1965). *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Ballantine Books, Reissue Edition, (1992).

1965 triggered the beginning of violence between these two factions, deepening the division within the black community at a time when unity could have allowed for greater gains.

Malcolm's 1964 speech called the "Ballot or the Bullet" was a call to black Americans to come together regardless of differences in religion, class, or political affiliation. His main focus was that a united people could overcome oppression if they kept ideology out of the quest for equality, a message that is eerily prescient in 2022. The main difference between the messages of Malcolm and Martin is that while Martin believed in non-violent resistance, Malcolm believed in peaceful engagement that was backed up with the willingness to defend oneself. He refused to allow himself or those in his movement to be brutalized as they had in the days of slavery. He did not trust in the promises of equality that were offered by white America; he was committed to self-determination, even promoting the idea of racial separation as a way for blacks to find equality. His belief that black people needed to recognize their own mastery over themselves was key to their inner and outer freedom.

Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965 shortly after visiting Selma, Alabama. While his killer was never found, he was believed to have been murdered on the order of Elijah Muhammed, self-proclaimed Messenger of Allah and leader of the Nation of Islam.