

# Martin Luther King and Malcolm X:

## Whose Philosophy Made the Most Sense for America in the 1960s?

### Introduction

On March 26, 1964, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X met for the first and only time. The occasion was a Senate debate on the passage of the landmark **Civil Rights** bill. They met in the halls of the United States Capitol building and spoke for only a few minutes. Eyewitness reports, as well as photographs of the meeting, suggest a respect and warmth between the leaders. Just two weeks before this meeting, Malcolm X had shocked America by announcing his break with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Now, free of the Black Muslims' ban on political activity, Malcolm planned to enter the fight for civil rights in America. The nation wondered: Would King and Malcolm X be able to put aside their philosophical and religious differences to fight for equality and the end of racism? We will never know. Malcolm was killed eleven months after his meeting with Dr. King, and just two days before the two were to have met for a more formal discussion. He was 39 years old when he died; King was also 39 when he was assassinated three years later.

Many Americans think of King and Malcolm X as perfect opposites. According to this view, one leader was a minister who believed in love and non-violent action as forces of political and social change. The other was a man of the streets, who advocated changing America by any means necessary. But is this view really accurate? Before examining the King and Malcolm X documents, read the short biographies that follow.

### Malcolm X: Biographical Information

Malcolm X's early life was one of extreme hardship and poverty. Born on May 19, 1925, he grew up in Lansing, Michigan, with the name Malcolm Little. His father, J. Early Little, was a preacher and a follower of Marcus Garvey, one of the earliest and most influential black nationalist thinkers. His father died a violent death, perhaps because of his political beliefs. His mother, Louise, was left to support eight children during the worst years of the Depression. "Our family was so poor," Malcolm recalled, "that we would eat the hole out of a doughnut...." The strain of raising eight hungry children led Louise Little to a mental breakdown.

Malcolm was separated from his siblings and sent to a series of foster and detention homes. Although Malcolm was treated decently by his white foster-care parents, the Swerlins, and excelled in an all white school (he was elected president of his seventh grade class), he was never comfortable. At the age of 15, he dropped out of school and moved to Boston, Massachusetts, to live with his half-sister. For the next six years, Malcolm experienced the excitement and dangers of the street. He moved to Harlem, where he ran numbers, sold drugs, and was finally caught and sentenced to eight to ten years in prison for armed robbery.

While in prison Malcolm encountered the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the **Nation of Islam**. The religion appealed to the young, angry Malcolm. Day and night Malcolm read and expanded his mind. He copied a dictionary from cover to cover and disciplined his thinking through hours of intense debate with other prisoners. Paroled from prison in 1952, he was a changed man both mentally and spiritually.

From 1952 until 1963, Malcolm X was a devout follower of Elijah Muhammad.

Malcolm's last name was changed to "X" to symbolize the African name that he could never know. To follow Mr. Muhammad meant submission to his spiritual ideas and his brand of **Black Nationalism**. The Nation of Islam demanded complete abstinence from drugs and alcohol, a limitation on foods such as pork, strict rules of prayer, a disciplined lifestyle at home, and respect for one's brothers and sisters. All of these things appealed to Malcolm as he compared them to the chaos and violence of his early life.

Followers of Elijah Muhammad were also taught that the white race had brainwashed blacks to be patient while enduring injustice on this earth. Malcolm adopted and preached this anti-white rhetoric, and because of this, he was considered racist by many people.

In the last years of his life, Malcolm began to change. Two weeks before he died, Malcolm said, "I am not a racist in any way, shape or form...." Malcolm's shift on racial issues came, in part, because of his trips to Africa and the Moslem holy city of Mecca. Here he saw individuals of all colors and languages praying together to the same god, **Allah**. By late 1963 Malcolm X had broken his ties with the Nation of Islam. For the next year and a half, Malcolm X set out to create his own organization dedicated to achieving a better life for blacks in America as well as all people of African descent. His Organization of Afro-American Unity (O.A.A.U.) became a powerful political force in a short period of time.

### Martin Luther King: Biographical Information

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. His father, Martin Luther King, Sr., was one of the most important ministers in the South and was himself the son of a preacher. Although young Martin's family was by no means

rich, it was clearly middle class. The King family had many positive role models and was full of Christian love. At the age of six, Martin was told by a white family that he could not play with their son because of his skin color. This hurt the boy who had never before been aware of racism. When he went home and tearfully explained what had happened, his parents sat him down and told him about the facts of racism in American life. But they also told young Martin, "Don't let it make you feel you are not as good as white people. You are as good as anyone else, and don't you forget it." Martin's parents also taught him that it was his Christian duty not to hate the white man. Martin took this teaching to heart.

In this loving and strict household, the young King's enormous talents were allowed to mature. He excelled in school, and at age 15 passed the entrance exam to Morehouse University and enrolled in college. He next attended Crozer Seminary and eventually received his Ph.D. in theology from Boston University. It was at Crozer that King was introduced to the life and teachings of **Mahatma Gandhi** Gandhi had led a massive nonviolent movement that freed India of British colonial rule. King was greatly impressed by Gandhi's nonviolence and appeal for love.

King did not leave school expecting to change the world. He was interested in becoming a local pastor. However, in December 1955, at the age of 26, King was thrust into the national spotlight. The week following Rosa Parks' decision to remain seated in the front of a Montgomery bus, King was chosen to lead a **boycott** that would send shock waves throughout America. His strong leadership and clear descriptions of the value of nonviolent protest helped keep the Montgomery boycotters from dividing. Within a year, Montgomery buses were desegregated.

Two years later, King and other ministers formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (S.C.L.C.). In early 1963, S.C.L.C. struck a blow at segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. Here King wrote his famous "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" detailing why the civil rights movement could no longer wait.

Next, King and his helpers staged a March on Washington in August of 1963. Over 250,000 people attended the rally at which King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. This march convinced President Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, that they had enough support in the country to push hard for a new set of laws ending segregation in the South. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 soon followed. These actions by Congress ended the **Jim Crow laws** and promised Federal government support in enforcing the new laws. For the role he played in bringing about these historic changes, King was awarded the **Nobel Peace Prize**. For the rest of his life he fought for voting rights, economic opportunity, fair housing, and racial justice throughout the country.

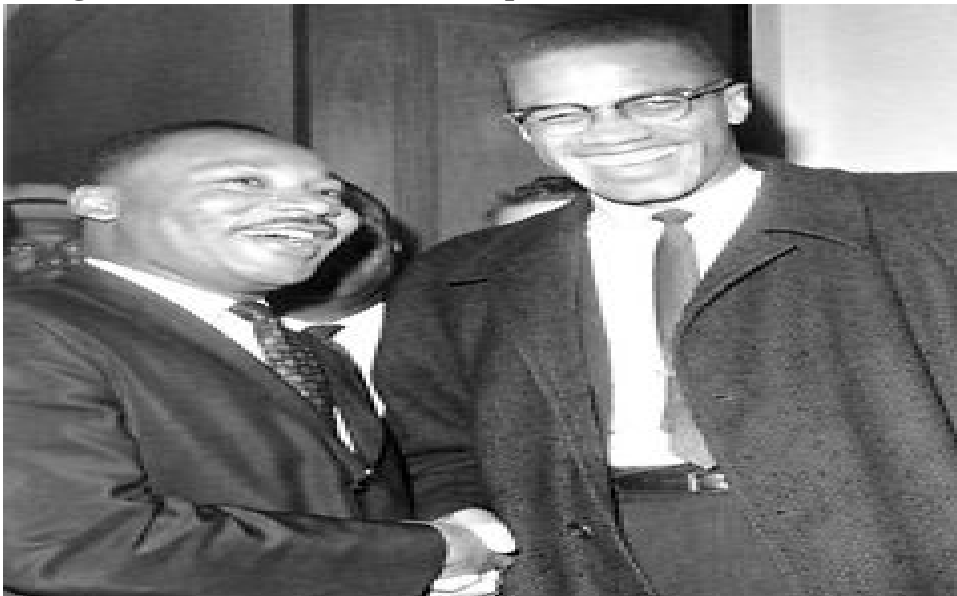
On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was gunned down by an assassin on a motel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee. In 13 short years, he had touched millions of lives and influenced an entire generation of people and leaders.

This DBQ asks you to examine the ideas of two men, one a Muslim who leaned towards racial separation, the other a Christian who was firmly integrationist. As you consider the documents that follow, remember that King and Malcolm X privately admired each other's style and courage. While they rarely praised each other in public, they were not enemies.

And now to the central question. How should America have confronted the inequalities of the 1960s? Or as this DBQ asks: *Martin Luther King and Malcolm X: Whose Philosophy Made the Most Sense for America in the 1960s?*

## **Document 1**

### **Martin Luther King and Malcolm X at the U.S. Capitol March 26, 1964**



## **Document 2**

**Source: Martin Luther King, "I Have a Dream." Speech. August 28, 1963**

I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day out in the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood....

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by their character....

With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to climb up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

## **Document 3**

**Source: *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1965**

I tell sincere white people, "Work in conjunction with us - each of us working among our own kind." Let sincere white individuals find all other white people they can who feel as they do - and let them form their own all-white groups, to work trying to convert other white people who are thinking and acting so racist. Let sincere whites go and teach non-violence to white people!

We will completely respect our white co-workers. They will deserve credit. We will give them every credit. We will meanwhile be working among our own kind, in our own black communities - showing and teaching black men in ways that only other black men can - that the black man has got to help himself. Working separately, the sincere white people and sincere black people actually will be working together

## **Document 4**

**Source: Martin Luther King, "Our God is Marching On." Speech made on Alabama State Capitol steps at the conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery march, March 21, 1965.**

We are on the move now. The burning of our churches will not deter us. We are on the move now. The bombing of our homes will not dissuade us. We are on the move now....

Let us march on segregated schools until every vestige of segregation and inferior education becomes a thing of the past and Negroes and whites study side by side in the socially healing context of the classroom....

## **Document 5**

**Source: *Basic Unity Program*, Organization of Afro-American Unity. Founded by Malcolm X in 1964.**

The Organization of Afro-American Unity will devise original educational methods and procedures which will liberate the minds of our children from the vicious lies and distortions that are fed to us from the cradle to keep us mentally enslaved. We encourage Afro-Americans themselves to establish experimental institutes and educational workshops, liberation schools and child-care centers in Afro-American communities.

## **Document 6**

**Source: Martin Luther King, "Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom." *Ebony*, October 21, 1961.**

Along with the march as a weapon for change in our nonviolent arsenal must be listed the boycott. Basic to the philosophy of nonviolence is the refusal to cooperate with evil. There is nothing quite so effective as a refusal to cooperate economically with the forces and institutions which perpetuate evil in our communities.

In the past six months simply by refusing to purchase products from companies which do not hire Negroes in meaningful numbers and in all job categories, the Ministers of Chicago under SCLC's Operation Breadbasket have increased the income of the Negro community by more than two million dollars annually.... This is nonviolence at its peak of power, when it cuts into the profit margin of a business in order to bring about a more just distribution of jobs and opportunities for Negro wage earners and consumers.

## **Document 7**

**Source: Malcolm X, quoted in George Breitman, *The Last Years of Malcolm X: Evolution of a Revolutionary*, 1967**

...(W)e have to learn how to own and operate the businesses of our community and develop them into some type of industry that will enable us to create employment for the people of our community so that they won't have to constantly be involved in picketing and boycotting other people in other communities in order to get a job.

Also, in line with this economic philosophy of black nationalism, in order for us to control the economy of our own community, we have to learn the importance of spending our money in the community where we live....(W)hen you take money out of the neighborhood in which you live...the neighborhood in which you spend your money becomes wealthier and wealthier, and the neighborhood out of which you take your money becomes poorer and poorer.

...(W)e haven't learned the importance of owning and operating businesses...so even when we try and spend our money in the neighborhood where we live, we're spending it with someone who puts it in a basket and takes it out as soon as the sun goes down.

So the economic philosophy of black nationalism puts the burden upon the black man of learning how to control his own economy.

## **Document 8**

**Source: Martin Luther King, speech made at a staff retreat. November 14, 1966.**

...(V)iolence may murder the murderer, but it doesn't murder murder. Violence may murder the liar, but it doesn't murder lie; it doesn't establish truth. Violence may even murder the dishonest man, but it doesn't murder dishonesty. Violence may go to the point of murdering the hater, but it doesn't murder hate. It may increase hate. It is always a descending spiral leading nowhere. This is the ultimate weakness of violence: It multiplies evil and violence in the universe. It doesn't solve any problems.

## **Document 9**

**Source: Malcolm X, interview in *The Young Socialist*. January 18, 1965.**

I don't favor violence. If we could bring about recognition and respect of our people by peaceful means, well and good. Everybody would like to reach his objectives peacefully. But I'm also a realist. The only people in this country who are asked to be nonviolent are black people. I've never heard anybody go to the Ku Klux Klan and teach them nonviolence....

Nonviolence is only preached to black Americans and I don't go along with anyone who wants to teach our people nonviolence until someone at the same time is teaching our enemy to be nonviolent. I believe we should protect ourselves by any means necessary when we are attacked by racists.