



The American Nightmare Continues:



Why Malcolm X's Political Legacy is
Still Relevant



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What would Malcolm do? It's a question you hear floating around at protests, public forums and organizing meetings. It shows the impact of Malcolm X's political legacy and reflects his relevance in the current struggle for Black liberation. For a man assassinated in early 1965, it may say something about how short we've come that we still look for his leadership. Or maybe, it says more about his ideas and actions that stand the test of time; perspectives that are still valid today because the same obstacle that Malcolm dedicated his life to conquering still exist today. Many other leaders from Malcolm X's era don't stand the test of time. The proof is in what side of the fight they stand on now. Malcolm however was of the masses, directed his message towards the masses and ultimately started creating a fighting strategy based on mass struggle. A struggle he was dedicated to win "**by any means necessary.**" Since Malcolm was murdered ultimately for his political perspectives, it's impossible to answer the question, "What would Malcolm do?" He's not alive to show us, but we can ask, "What *did* Malcolm do and do his politics still push us towards Black Liberation?"

First and foremost Malcolm X woke people up. His aim was to prepare Black people to fight for their freedom. He said, "*The greatest mistake of the movement has been trying to organize a sleeping*

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people around specific goals. You have to wake the people up first, then you'll get action." "Wake them up to their exploitation?" an interviewer asked. "No, to their humanity, to their own worth and to their heritage," Malcolm answered.

Malcolm as Educator

Ever since Malcolm first emerged to the public as a Minister in the Nation of Islam he spoke to Black people about Black history. He exposed the lies of public school history books and told the truth of America's origins in Black exploitation. He explained how Africans were captured by whites and made into slaves through the most horrific, dehumanizing barbaric cruelty. Blacks were taught to be submissive to whites, to bow down and fear the white man. They were systematically robbed of their language, culture, names and identities. This is why, as Malcolm explained, he and other members of the Nation of Islam took the last name "X". To signify the unknown, to acknowledge that they were aware of the crimes the whites in America had committed against Black people. Malcolm dedicated his life to reclaiming what had been robbed of him and his people by the system. He pointed to the countless accomplishments of Blacks around the world. Advocating standing up and fighting, he said Black folks must defend themselves against the savage attacks of white

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supremacists and the U.S government. This, he advocated, would break the stereotype of Black submissiveness and gain the respect that all human beings deserve since birth.

The Question of Post-Racialism

Some promote the idea that since the election of the first Black president we live in a “post-racial” society. For the rest of us who don’t have the privilege to ignore the criminal reality of racist America, we know that “post-racial” only means omitting the facts. Facts like higher unemployment rates for Black people, higher rates of eviction and foreclosure on Black homes. Facts like higher rates of conviction and incarceration for petty crimes or crimes they didn’t commit. Mainstream America, and in particular mass media’s criminalization of Black skin is the real crime. Malcolm said, **“The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent.”** This systematic racist process is “criminal”, as Malcolm himself would describe it. The criminalization of Black skin gets young, beautiful Black kids murdered by police and left to lie in the streets for hours like an animal. The very fact that Mike Brown was stopped and harassed for walking down the street in his own neighborhood is far too reminiscent of the

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pass laws¹ in South Africa or night riders in the Jim Crow South, and it is only justified to some by the fact that far too many people see young Black kids as “thugs,” like these youth don’t have family, loved ones, dreams and aspirations, immeasurable talents and ideas that make this world better. Just like all of our youth, regardless of skin color. This criminalization of Black skin allows the system to try and justify the murder of 1 Black person every 28 hours by police or vigilantes². Malcolm X combated this criminalization with love and truth. Love for his people, yes, but this love was based on a truth that all people must understand. This truth is that in the struggle for progress and freedom, Black people have and will continue to play a vanguard role in the United States. Black leadership and Black resistance plays an historical role in the country as a whole by leading political fights from the time of the founding of the U.S., through slavery, into the Civil War and to this very day.

Today, this is exemplified by the how the Black lives matter movement is playing the vanguard role in the fight to de-militarize the police, end police

¹ In South Africa, Pass laws were a form of internal passport system designed to segregate the population, severely limit the movements of the Black African populace.

² The figure “every 28 hours” comes from an April 2013 report titled “Operation Ghetto Storm” by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. The report analyzed officer-involved killings of African-American victims in 2012.

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violence and mass incarceration across the country.

This was the message that Malcolm X consistently brought to his people, a real education on Black history and a fight against the racist miseducation that takes place in America. In an interview with the Young Socialists in 1965, Malcolm said:

"If the entire American population were properly educated—by properly educated, I mean given a true picture of the history and contributions of the Black man—I think many whites would be less racist in their feelings. They would have more respect for the Black man as a human being. Knowing what the Black man's contributions to science and civilization have been in the past, the white man's feelings of superiority would be at least partially negated. Also, the feeling of inferiority that the Black man has would be replaced by a balanced knowledge of himself. He'd feel more like a human being. He'd function more like a human being, in a society of human beings. So it takes education to eliminate it. And just because you have colleges and universities doesn't mean you have education. The colleges and universities in the American educational system are skillfully used to mis-educate."

But it doesn't just take education; it takes continual mass action against the system to remove the

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institutions of oppression. Malcom knew this, and his increasing efforts to organize such mass action began to clash with the Nation of Islam. This combined with Malcolm's discovery that the *"moral reformation... part of its program was bankrupt"* ultimately lead to Malcolm leaving the Nation of Islam in early 1964. It was in this last year of Malcolm X's life that we truly see his uncompromising revolutionary politics emerge. While in the Nation, Malcolm prefaced most things he said with, *"the Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches thus and so,"* but after leaving, as Malcolm put it, *"the parrot has jumped out of the cage."*

Malcolm X spoke the truth. In an America which he so relentlessly exposed as the bastion of hypocrisy, not democracy, truth is hard to come by, but Malcolm was uncompromising in his pursuit of the truth. As he said, *"I am for truth, no matter who tells it."* The reason he had this point of view is because he knew that, *"truth is on the side of the oppressed."* He continually exposed who the real criminals were, who were at fault for the injustice and oppression that Black people face in America. This is still incredibly important today not only so that we see who our enemies are, but also so that we don't internalize the blame and lose sight of the fact that a racist, oppressive system constricts any individual personal attempt to *"overcome adversity."*

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Malcolm constantly told the truth to expose the lies about Black people in general and also the lies about him personally. He was called a violent hater who advocated violence. We, who are a part of the movement for Black liberation today, face the same attacks in an attempt to stop mass support and dismantle the movement. We must react as Malcolm did. He continually exposed the real source of violence as the oppressor not the oppressed. How could the American government preach nonviolence to Blacks while four little girls are bombed in their church, while America kills Vietnamese for exercising their right to sovereignty, while it backs the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo and while they use vicious dogs and fire hoses on people who just want freedom and equality for all? Malcolm never advocated violence, he advocated self-defense, there's a difference. He once said,

“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 believe we should protect ourselves by any means necessary when we are attacked by racists...”

On Republicans & Democrats

Malcolm didn't believe that the oppressed could rely on some sort of common humanity shared with the oppressors. He realized that there was a vast difference between their morals and ours. He said, **"Don't you run around here trying to make friends with somebody who's depriving you of your rights. They're not your friends. No, they're your enemies. Treat them like that and fight them, and you'll get your freedom."**

This revolutionary perspective is why Malcolm X, unlike many of the civil rights leaders, saw no path to freedom in the Republican or the Democratic parties. Malcolm was a staunch opponent of the Democrats in a time when much of the movement was co-opted by the relationship of civil rights leaders and the Democrats. Ultimately Malcolm's class perspective saw the Democrats for what they were, a party of the oppressors. *"Both parties, Democrat and Republican, are controlled by the same people who have abused our rights, and who have deceived us with false promises every time an election rolls around,"* he said. *"Both parties are racist, and the Democratic Party is more racist than the Republican Party....You put the Democrats first and the Democrats put you last."* This perspective of Malcolm X's is of the utmost importance today.

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In a moment when we see a large national resistance to police violence against people of color, police who kill with impunity, we also see the Democrats trying to calm us down. They tell us they're on our side, they sympathize, they feel our pain, and then they tell us we must engage in peaceful protests and America will listen and change. They buy into the idea that we're the violent ones, when in reality the violence we see daily is a direct result of the system which the Democrats uphold and defend, capitalism. Thankfully, many in the leadership of the Black Lives Matter movement today have rejected some of the old guard leaders like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson who are Democrats, **but it's not just about party affiliation, it's a political question. Who do you look to for change?** Do you look to sympathetic "friends" of the ruling class or do you look to the oppressed masses? Historically, the struggle for Black liberation has always advanced through regular, everyday Black folks and their allies taking to the streets and fighting for what is rightfully theirs, looking inward, not outward. Malcolm was a shining example of this political perspective and ultimately began organizing and charting a course based on independent political action independent of both major parties. This was reflected in the founding of the Organization of Afro-American Unity in June of 1964 by Malcolm and other Black liberation fighters.

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In the plainest of words, Malcolm X was a revolutionary. He knew that the system could not be reformed, it had to be overturned. It was because of this viewpoint that he continually clashed with many civil rights leaders. But it was also because of this viewpoint that Malcolm X connected to the Black masses and that he connected to the colonial struggles in Africa, Asia and Latin America and it was this viewpoint that inspired the Black Power Movement of the late 60s and 70s. Malcolm said, *"The system in this country cannot produce freedom for an Afro-American. It is impossible for this system, this economic system, this political system, this social system, this system, period."* He also said, **"You can't have capitalism without racism,"** and that *"it is impossible for capitalism to survive...it's only a matter of time in my opinion before it will collapse completely."*

Malcolm's sharp analysis, his ability to look at the material basis of the system and therefore to deny any stake in that system, is an example we must follow today. It is literally a question of life and death. When we say "we", it must mean what it meant to Malcolm, the oppressed of the entire world.

On Internationalism

One of Malcolm's great examples was the internationalist perspective that he developed. He

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was inspired by the oppressed masses of the world during his time that made revolutionary uprisings and even some who took power. Looking at the non-white, oppressed masses beating back colonialism, and in the case of Cuba, completely overturning the system, made Malcolm realize the odds were actually in the favor of the oppressed. He said, *"This system is not only ruling us in America-it's ruling the world."* This is a crucial understanding for today's movement for Black liberation to take on.

On Women

This process to "broaden the scope", as Malcolm would put it, is not only necessary to extend to other nations, but also to all oppressed sections within the United States. Malcolm made leaps and bounds in regard to his view on the role of women in society for example. While in the Nation of Islam, and even in the months after the split, he held very reactionary views on the role women should play in the struggle and in society in general. But in a few short months Malcolm came to the assessment that,

"In every country you go to, usually the degree of progress can never be separated from the woman. If you're in a country that's progressive, the woman is progressive." And:

"I'm frankly proud of the contributions that our women have made in the struggle for freedom and I'm one for giving them all the leeway possible because they've made a greater contribution than many of us men."

On Faith

Also on religion, Malcolm was "broadening the scope." Of course Malcolm remained a Muslim until the day he died, but in regards to what role religion plays in politics, in building a revolutionary organization capable of "*overturning the system of exploitation that exists on this earth by any means necessary,*" Malcolm was ready to work with anyone of any faith, and also those of no faith. He said,

"It's true we're Muslims and our religion is Islam, but we don't mix our religion with our politics and our economics and our social and civic activities-not anymore. We keep our religion in our mosque."

Because, as Malcolm told a meeting of people in New York five days before he was assassinated, "*whether he was a Methodist or a Baptist or an atheist or an agnostic, [Blacks] caught the same hell.*"

On Building a Broad Based Movement

The reason Malcolm was broadening his perspectives on these issues was because he knew it would take a broad, mass struggle to overturn the system of exploitation and win freedom for his people. He knew it would take every day ordinary folks who bring a diversity of beliefs and ideologies to the table. **We too must look at the struggle the way Malcolm did. Who is here to fight police brutality? How are we going to win? How do people become revolutionaries? These are the questions we must ask today.**

Far too often there's an elitist perspective among people who want to end the system. They think only they and people who think like them are capable of such a feat. **The reality is many people who have no desire to overthrow the system at this present moment will be the ones to do it, because through struggle around immediate demands those people realize that they have no stake in the system, that what they want could never be achieved through the system, that for instance, the police can't be reformed. The movement for Black liberation must "broaden the scope", toward the masses of Black people, workers, women, youth and all of the oppressed and move away from the Democratic Party, the non-profits and academia. The struggle exists in**

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our communities, for example, around families who have had their loved ones taken from them by killer cops who enforce the ways of a racist system. This is what Malcolm's legacy teaches us.

Lastly, as Malcolm X has shown us, we have to be committed politically to reaching out to young people. ***"Our accent will be upon youth," Malcolm said, "because the youth have less at stake in this corrupt system and therefore can look at it more objectively, whereas the adults usually have a stake in this corrupt system and they lose their ability to look at it objectively..."***

This is one of many things Malcolm said about the militancy of the youth. The youth will provide an energy and militancy necessary to go up against such a powerful enemy, an enemy that Malcolm exposed in plain English.

These are complex ideas, but Malcolm was a straight shooter. His brilliance was being able to express such complex ideas in a way we all can understand. These are the methods we have to hit the streets with. In order to build a broad movement massive enough to win liberation for Black people, Malcolm's legacy is a shining example of how to fight. His life is one that everyone should study, to see the political evolution of a revolutionary that every oppressed member of the world can relate to and is capable

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of themselves. **If we look to the youth we can see that there are more Malcolms to come, fighters who use the uncompromising truth to expose the hypocrisy of an oppressive system, and use that same truth to wake us up to our own worth, our power.** So in conclusion, we'd like to end on a message from Malcolm to the youth, he said:

"In my opinion, the young generation of whites, Blacks, browns, whatever else there is, you're living at a time of extremism, a time of revolution, a time when there's got to be a change, people in power have misused it, and now there has to be a change. And a better world has to be built and the only way it's going to be built is with extreme methods. And I, for one, will join in with anyone—don't care what color you are—as long as you want to change this miserable condition that exists on this earth."

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