

**The myths and facts of Malcolm X and his involvement in the human rights
movement**

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During the civil rights movement, there were a handful of notable activists, but one stands out because of his lifestyle and controversial ways of challenging social norms at the time. Malcolm X was a significant figure in the American civil rights movement during the 1950s and early 1960s. He was born in 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska, as Malcolm Little, and later removed the surname and replaced it with X to represent his families lost African surname. Malcolm was a devoted Muslim, although he was known by the public as a radical and discordant figure in the civil rights movement. At the time, people who were on his side of history and people who were opposed saw him as a controversial person for numerous reasons. Malcolm had a short but powerful life, and, in this paper, I am going to explore his early life that led to his political prowess and how he overcame adversity to seal his spot in history. Not only for the things he was commonly known for, but also the common misconceptions about him as a leader and role model for many. They see how Malcolm was a violent, uneducated, man whose intentions were not equality but superiority. What they did not see is the progress that was made for minorities because of his work.

Malcolm X was seen as a violent man due to him being in and out of the incarceration system throughout his life as a young man. Burglary charges landed him 10 years in prison, and this is where he would start to familiarize himself with the lessons of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of The Nation of Islam (NOI), a black separatist syndicate. This organization had firm beliefs on self-reliance and black power. “Malcolm continued to devote his time to studying in the prison’s library.” (Ehrenbold et al., 2023). These principles and teachings he studied while incarcerated had enormous influence on X’s future teachings. His sentencing too could have been the best thing to happen to him in hindsight as it started his interest in sparking his education up again and eventually led to Malcolm joining the penitentiary debate team. Malcolm

was released from prison in 1952 and became a minister for the NOI upon release, thanks to his time practicing and perfecting public speaking and debating while imprisoned.

Many people at the time believed Malcolm X was a hoodlum who was in and out of jail, so why would they want to give such man a voice? A man whose education stopped at 8th grade until he was incarcerated. Well, many people did not want him to have a voice. In fact, he was looked down upon by White-America due to his teachings of black independence and self-reliance, as was Martin Luther King Jr. for his respective speaking's. He faced many obstacles in his life, including poverty, racism, and incarceration which gave him insight and personal experience with setbacks and that allowed fellow Black Americans to relate. He also struggled with personal demons, including drug addiction and infidelity, which is what people would try to use to defame him. Malcolm X's views on race and politics were controversial, and he was often criticized by both Black and White Americans.

Continuing with controversy, Malcolm was frowned upon because he was seen as a radical man for his political ways of self-defense while other leaders at the same time in the same field, Stokely Carmichael and King Jr. for example, were openly condemned that style of leadership. He was accused of promoting violence and racism, and his speeches were often inflammatory. Malcolm X was known for saying phrases calling white men in particular, the devil or the enemy. However, Malcolm X believed that his message was necessary to wake up Black Americans to the reality of their situation. Along with being a member of the Islamic religion, did not bode well with White Americans at the time. This is what started a sort of cause-and-effect relationship where the white people would incite violence against Malcolm and his protests, and he would not stand for violence without retaliation, which leads to more violence. "In fact, [Malcolm X] never called for violence nor did he encourage his supporters to initiate it."

(Spahalic, 2022) It was the largest misconception that Malcolm X was a violent leader, as he was only promoting self-defense from the violence that was started by opposing groups that retaliated to his messages. He thought, why African Americans should sit and take the abuse from police and whites without retaliation. If self-defense is considered violence, then what would his opposing crowd have to say about the attacks on his civil rights peers who protested peacefully and were met by the same backlash.

They heard the messages saying the white man is the enemy were a target on the entire country and saw Malcolm X as public enemy number one. X saw the injustice in the country and blamed the entirety of the white race for the problems. That is, until he embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca, which had a profound impact on his views on race and religion. Muslims from all around the world are supposed to make the pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime, if possible. Now, we all know that people from around the world come in vast shapes, sizes, colors, and most importantly diverse backgrounds. Malcolm saw the crowd of Muslims and made note that no two were the same which made him challenge the teaching of black separatism and self-reliance that he once preached. Malcolm X, later changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz following the pilgrimage mentioned this in his autobiography by saying, "I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept on the same rug - while praying to the same God - with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white." (X, 1964) This quote from Malcolm's letter from Mecca shows how he saw for himself that it is not the color of somebody's skin or hair that makes the soul bitter. He returned from Mecca with a new message of unity of all races. Not long after returning from Mecca, Malcolm X cut ties from the NOI and started an organization of his own. "He founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which

identified racism, and not the white race, as the enemy of justice.” (History, 2009) I think this quote clearly shows how Malcolm’s change of heart disproves the still, quite common misconception of how he was a leader of violence and radicalism. He went from a civil rights activist to a human rights activist. His change of heart also was a wonderful way to show people of that time that people could change their views for the better. As well as showing how great America could be if united, as the name of this country claims.

That change of heart did not sit well with members of the Nation of Islam and other black Americans who believed his initial message of black reliance was the way. Malcolm X was becoming a target in both white and black communities again but for the reason of wanting unity rather than separation. Malcolm was assassinated in February of 1965 and at the time people held beliefs that the killers were members of the Nation of Islam. He was a powerful man and people wanted to strip that power away once he was no longer in their corner “Though it was initially believed that the three assassins were members of the Nation of Islam and were affiliated with religious leader... the killing remains controversial and no consensus exists” (History, 2009) Looking at this quote from the History article on Malcolm X, it just adds to the growing list of misconceptions about the life of X. I think the killing of Malcolm was a tragic event in American history but without it, the message would still be vague and obscure as people do not seem to get the point until there is something to reflect on. I do not believe it was necessary, but it was a large leap forward for the civil and human rights of all Americans.

Furthermore with how Malcolm X was a seriously influential person in the history of our country whether he was looked up or down on at the time. The fact that he was such a controversial man for a topic that is still a relevant issue today shows how those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it. I believe that this is a life story that should be intervened into the

school's curriculum as it is just as important as any Martin Luther King Jr. gesture was. Malcolm X was willing to fight for his people, and it shows how ugly-America fought back. Hugh Muir, a writer for the Guardian, says in an article on Malcolm's life and his legacy in the afterlife, "He was America's harshest critic." (Muir, 2011) A man whose ideologies started with black empowerment and reliance from white-America, then to complete unity like other activists at the time shows how he was not only a critic, but also that he was able to take criticism from these other influential figures to help guide himself to a brighter future. I say all Americans can look at Malcolm's life and his ability to change and want unity and learn to be the same way.

Overall, I believe the life of Malcolm X was and is a cornerstone for America to reflect on and learn from. MLK Jr and Malcolm are two prime examples of power and the voice being stripped from black Americans across the country and that is why I believe it is important to implement new curriculum into school systems. As well as clearing up controversial misconceptions that may have a negative impact of the life of this specific American Hero.

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