

Voices of a Generation: Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr. first became a prominent voice in the Civil Rights movement in 1955 when, as a new pastor in Montgomery, Alabama, he agreed to head the **Montgomery Improvement Association**. The organization was formed to coordinate the **Montgomery bus boycott**, prompted by the arrest of **Rosa Parks** for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger. King was the primary representative for the group during the boycott, and was able to succeed by using protest strategies that involved mobilizing the African-American community through their churches and utilizing the non-violent protest methods of Indian civil rights activist **Mahatma Gandhi**.

As Civil Rights protests spread throughout the South and eventually the nation, King continued to combine peaceful methods of protest and his theological training to work toward the goal of equal rights for African Americans. On August 28, 1963, King participated in the **March on Washington**, where 250,000 black and white people rallied in support of the civil rights bill that was pending in Congress. Near the end of the day at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King Jr. made his now-famous "**I Have a Dream**" speech. His words, echoing the Bible and the Constitution, expressed hope that his dream of equality for all people would someday be realized.



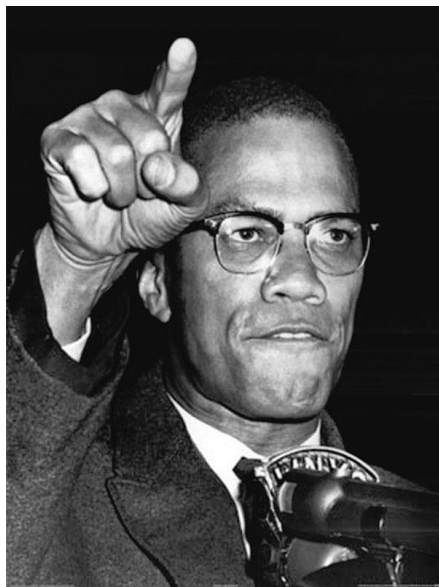
[Martin Luther King delivers the "I have a dream" speech from the podium at the March on Washington, 1963, Bob Adelman, Library of Congress](#)

Malcolm X first became involved in the Civil Rights Movement when, after a stint in prison, he turned his life around and aligned himself with the **Nation of Islam**. His siblings had written to him in prison, expounding the beliefs of the new religious movement, which preached a complete separation of the races as the solution to the problems faced by black Americans. It preached self-reliance, non-destructive behavior, strict discipline, and advocated for the eventual return of blacks to Africa in order to truly be free from white supremacy. In 1950, a fully-converted Malcolm replaced his birth surname "Little" with "X," explaining that "X" symbolized the African family name that he would never know. In his autobiography he wrote, "For me, my 'X' replaced the white slavemaster name of 'Little' which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears."

While both men emerged as prominent voices in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X differed in their philosophies and approaches to solving racial inequality. King's promotion of non-violent, direct-action efforts for complete integration and the achievement of full civil rights ran contrary to that of his fellow activist. Malcolm X promoted complete separation of the races, rejected any form of integration, and opposed King's philosophy of non-violence as a means of protest. Malcolm X equated King's non-violent philosophy to being defenseless against white racism. The two

men also differed in matters of religion, which heavily guided both of their philosophies. King, a Christian Baptist pastor, led the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference** and preached his message in churches. Malcolm X was a convert to the Nation of Islam and significantly raised the religious movement's profile, preaching his message first on street corners and then moving to larger venues as the movement grew in popularity.

In a television interview, psychology professor **Dr. Kenneth B. Clark** discussed with King his philosophy of non-violence and why King believed that it was the best method to enact change for the African American community. King explained that "Non-violent direct action is a method of acting to rectify a social situation that is unjust and it involves in engaging in a practical technique that nullifies the use of violence or calls for non-violence at every point. That is, you don't use physical violence against the opponent. . . . I think that non-violent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom and human dignity. It has a way of disarming the opponent. It exposes his moral defenses. It weakens his morale and at the same time it works on his conscience. He just doesn't know how to handle it and I have seen this over and over again in our struggle in the South."



[Malcolm X during Harlem rally](#), 1963, Library of Congress

Clark then addressed the differences between King and Malcolm X, calling attention to the fact that Malcolm X had criticized King's method of non-violent opposition by saying King's philosophy "plays into the hands of the white oppressors, that they are happy to hear [King] talk about love for the oppressor because this disarms the Negro and fits into the stereotype of the Negro as a meek, turning-the-other-cheek sort of creature." King replied, "I don't think of [love] as a weak force, but I think of [it] as something strong and that organizes itself into powerful direct action. Now, this is what I try to teach in this struggle in the South: that we are not engaged in a struggle that means we sit down and do nothing; that there is a great deal of difference between non-resistance to evil and non-violent resistance. Non-resistance leaves you in a state of stagnant passivity and deadly complacency, where non-violent resistance means that you do resist in a very strong and determined manner and I think some of the criticisms of non-violence or some of the critics fail to

realize that we are talking about something very strong and they confuse non-resistance with non-violent resistance." While King did state the differences between himself and Malcolm X, he refused to debate him publicly, not wanting his work to be jeopardized and thrown in a negative light by one who was all too eager to do so. For his part, Malcolm X publicly denounced Martin Luther King many times, calling the preacher a modern-day **Uncle Tom** stating that "By teaching them to love their enemy, or pray for those who use them spitefully, today Martin Luther King is just a 20th century or modern Uncle

Tom, or a religious Uncle Tom, who is doing the same thing today, to keep Negroes defenseless in the face of an attack.”

In time, Malcolm X would become less confrontational with King and his philosophies, due in part to his growing estrangement with the Nation of Islam. Tensions grew when Malcolm X and the leader of the Nation of Islam, **Elijah Muhammed**, differed on the Nation’s response to a shooting of a Nation member by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1962; Malcolm X demanded action while Muhammed advocated caution and patience. The disagreement came to a head the following year in 1963 when it was revealed that Muhammed had been carrying on extra-marital affairs – a serious violation of the Nation of Islam’s strict teachings. Dismayed by Muhammed’s hypocrisy and realizing the Nation’s limitations due to its stringent doctrine, Malcolm X broke with the movement in 1964.

After Malcolm X broke ties with the separatist Muslim movement, he began to speak more reverently of the viewpoints of Martin Luther King Jr. He publicly acknowledged, "Dr. King wants the same thing I want - freedom!" This new perspective prompted Malcolm X to arrange a meeting with King, but the meeting never happened. It was scheduled for Tuesday, February 24, 1965 but two days earlier Malcolm X was assassinated by Nation of Islam members. In a letter to Malcolm X’s wife following his assassination, King acknowledged their differing philosophies, writing, “While we did not always see eye to eye on methods to solve the race problem, I always had a deep affection for Malcolm and felt that he had a great ability to put his finger on the existence and root of the problem. He was an eloquent spokesman for his point of view and no one can honestly doubt that Malcolm had a great concern for the problems that we face as a race.”

Glossary

Dr. Kenneth B. Clark: (1914-2005) African American psychologist best known for his work on race relations.

Elijah Muhammed: (1897-1975) African American Muslim religious leader, led the Nation of Islam from 1934 to 1975; mentor to Malcolm X.

I Have a Dream: a speech given by Martin Luther King on August 28, 1963 at the conclusion of the March on Washington. It is widely regarded as one of the most important speeches in American history.

Mahatma Gandhi: (1869-1948) Indian political and spiritual leader during India’s struggle for Independence from Great Britain. Known for his peaceful, passive, non-violent forms of protest.

March on Washington: a political rally held on August 28, 1963 in Washington, D.C. More than 250,000 people gathered for the rally, organized by civil rights and religious groups. The march concluded with Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

Montgomery bus boycott: organized by Martin Luther King Jr., the boycott began in 1955 following the arrest of Rosa Parks. It began a chain reaction of boycotts throughout the South.

Montgomery Improvement Association: the organization was formed following the December 1955 arrest of Rosa Parks to oversee the Montgomery bus boycott.

Nation of Islam: an Islamic religious movement founded in Detroit, United States in 1930, led by Elijah Muhammed. It's most famous member was Malcolm X.

Rosa Parks: (1913-2005) African American civil rights activist; refused to surrender her bus seat to a white passenger, which spurred the Montgomery bus boycott and other efforts to end segregation.

Southern Christian Leadership Conference: an African American civil rights organization; closely associated with its first president, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Uncle Tom: an epithet for a person who is slavish and excessively subservient to perceived authority figures, particularly a black person who behaves in a subservient manner to white people; or any person perceived to be complicit in the oppression of their own group. Derives from the African American character "Uncle Tom" from the 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe.