

Civil rights leaders bring distinct styles to movement

King, Malcolm disagree on best path

Editor's note: This is an essay to close February's Black History Month Celebration.

Blacks have been denied equal rights in the continent of North America for nearly 400 years. Brought over as slaves, these African people, once rich with a history, culture and land of their own, were robbed of the possessions Americans hold most dear.

Since then, many people have fought for the rights of black people in this nation. Two very important people at the forefront of this fight were Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. In the struggle of black people, both had similar goals for black people, but with very different approaches to achieving those goals.

To really understand the difference between these two men, one must first realize that they came from drastically different backgrounds. This is probably the key in determining the reason for their dissimilarities.

Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little, experienced a very hard childhood. When Malcolm was very young, his father, a follower of Pan African leader Marcus Garvey, was murdered by white men and his mother was committed to an insane asylum.

Malcolm was then shifted from

home to home. These frequent shifts prevented him from becoming involved in strong relationships. In his teen-age years, Malcolm found himself in a life of crime. He became a full-time hustler, dope peddler, pimp and subsequently was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

On the other side of the coin, Martin Luther King was brought up in rather congenial surroundings. Both his mother and father were present throughout his life. King's father was a baptist minister, which helped instill many values in King. King's choice to become a minister is an indication that he must have seen his father as a role model — another one of Malcolm's lacking components.

Development of philosophies

King had always been a hometown hero in Montgomery, Ala., due to his uplifting sermons and speeches. But he gained his first political spotlight when he decided to be the spokesman for the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956. After the boycott's victory, King took a power position in what would soon come to be the Civil Rights struggle. He set his eyes on the issue of segregation. King believed that separation of races was inherently destructive to this generation's children and their future children. In this mode, Civil Rights became King's political philosophy.

While in jail, Malcolm was visited by a relative, who informed him of a man named the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, a leader of a religious sect called the Black Muslims. This man, Muhammad, was believed to have seen God in the form of a man named Master Wallace D. Fard.

Master Fard gave Muhammad the knowledge that black people were God's chosen people in bondage and that Islam was the religion that would set black people free. Muhammad wrote encouraging letters to Malcolm while Malcolm was in jail and spoke to him with a compassion and understanding he had never known before. Through Muhammad's letters, Malcolm was inspired to read and to gain as much knowledge as possible. After serving seven years, Malcolm was released from prison. Upon leaving prison, Malcolm began to work closely with Muhammad, recruiting new members and educating the black community about the black community's current situation.

One of the points Malcolm stressed was that black people had been maneuvered into a position of prostitution by the white man. He also pointed out that if Blacks were in complete charge of the community in which they lived, they would be in a power position to determine where the black race was going. This brought on Malcolm's philosophy of black na-

tionalism through separation.

Movement Approaches

It's important to include that King also served time in jail. He committed the crime of demonstrating on public property. King held many demonstrative movements such as sit-ins, public petitions and marches, most of which were attacked by white onlookers. But this violence was not returned by King nor his followers.

King followed closely with the teachings of Gandhi, who promoted nonviolence and love in return for hate. One of the most important speeches King ever gave was his "I Have a Dream" speech given during the march on Washington. King's speech stressed his beliefs in the American dream and hope for integration in the future. He spoke of the beauty he found in the Declaration of Independence and in other documents that captured the ideas of American freedom.

All of this disillusioned Malcolm. Malcolm not only rejected the idea of integration, but he also disagreed with King's method of taking action. In fact, Malcolm's criticism became harsh when he called King a "chump" for using kids as demonstrators, a "clown" for marching on Washington (which was controlled by whites) and a "traitor to his race" for advocating nonviolence, especially when blacks were being attacked at any given time and were receiving no protection from any-

one.


Malcolm viewed nonviolence as an "Uncle Tom" mentality. He viewed retaliation not as violence but as intelligence. He often spoke of a new generation of black people who were going to demand "freedom or death." King thought returning violence with violence was counterproductive, and therefore immoral. Needless to say, the two ideas of these men caused a distinct difference in the types of people who followed them both.

King was usually followed by middle-aged to elderly blacks and whites, while Malcolm's followers tended to be mostly young blacks to blacks in their mid-30s.

King was a very eloquent speaker. His words were thoughtful, beautiful and true to the heart. His message was so important to history that his birthday was made a national holiday.

El Hajj Malik El Shabazz (Malcolm X) was an electrifying speaker. His words were hard ones that tapped at the human emotion and were right to the point. But until just recently, he was a hero whose story was sung quietly. I believe both men are equally important in the history and struggle of African people. They had the same objectives, only different ways of reaching them.

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