

A Review Essay

THE FIGHTING SPIRIT OF OUR FALLEN WARRIOR—MALCOLM X

by Abdul Alkalimat

MALCOLM X: THE LAST SPEECHES. edited by Bruce Perry, New York: Pathfinder, 1989.

The publication of speeches by Malcolm X, especially previously unpublished speeches, will always be an important event. More than any other publisher, Pathfinder Press has kept expanding the availability of Malcolm's speeches, interviews, and writings.

Malcolm X is the preeminent activist-intellectual in the revolutionary tradition of African American nationalism and Pan-Africanism. He carried this tradition forward to great heights and challenged Martin Luther King for the leadership of the black liberation movement. King had the full apparatus of the liberal wing of the capitalist state and media, as well as the black church and mainstream middle-class black leadership. While Malcolm X built his mass base

from the bottom up in the underclass ghetto until he was killed in 1965, Malcolm X was the main ideological source for the transformation of the civil rights movement into the black liberation movement in 1966 with the emergence of the black power slogan. It seems that Malcolm's greatest impact came after he was killed, while King seemed to have reaped the full harvest of his life's work.

King's day
done
Malcolm's day
yet
be won.

The *Last Speeches* of Malcolm X is a book designed to demonstrate the development of his thinking from his latter days as a Nation of Islam (NOI) Minister to the quite amazing last year of his life. In this sense it is in keeping with the editorial legacy left by George Breitman, the edi-

tor who guided Pathfinder's publications about Malcolm in the 1960s. There are two NOI speeches (1/23/63 and 10/11/63), two interviews (12/2/64 and 12/27/64), and two Organization of African Unity (OAU) speeches (2/15/65 and 2/16/65). Steve Clark, in his Publisher's Foreword, identifies seven themes in the speeches that he believes reveal a transition in Malcolm's thinking: racist oppressors, anti-imperialism, internationalism and black liberation, political action, civil rights struggles, religion and political organization, and women's political and social advancement.

There are two editorial considerations in the book that are of some concern because they begin to impact the interpretation and use of Malcolm's legacy. Bruce Perry—who had the speeches under his control—edited them and gave them to Pathfinder. Perry is not a Trotskyist in the Pathfinder mold, as he points out:

Pathfinder Press has its political views and I have mine, which differ substantially. Pathfinder's political assessment of Malcolm is also different from mine. But one thing we do agree about is that Malcolm's views should be heard.

We all agree on the last point, but we have to be wary of what politics we put out front. The problem is that Perry's name is on the cover and his introduction is a self-serving research note. Somehow this takes away from the ideological clarity of the project. Perry has a very controversial Freudian reductionist position on Malcolm, suggesting a parallel to Styron's treatment of Nat Turner. (See his "Neither White Nor Black," *Ethnic Groups*, 1986, Vol. 6, pp. 293-304.) It is understandable for Pathfinder to work with Perry in publishing the speeches, but it is hard to imagine why they gave him such prominent, and therefore indirectly provided advance publicity for his coming book that is likely to be universally rejected by the Black community.

The second editorial issue is the "translation" from the audio tape to the printed page. The Pathfinder rendition attempts to put it as it appears on the tape, and this attempt at historical accuracy is commendable. However, the semantic imperative is to maintain his style of clarity and culturally correct speech acts, especially meaning, in which great emphasis was

placed on intonation, gesture, and rhythm. Just putting down the words, therefore, is not good enough. One must utilize the advances made in black English linguistics to produce a text that better presents on paper what black people read with their ears when they hear Malcolm rap. It might well be argued, though, that the verbatim text, in specific cases of possible misinterpretation, should be included in footnotes just as they have done for points that clarify historical facts.

This new text of Malcolm X's work does make important contributions to our understanding, although in most cases these are not entirely new points, just corroborative.

1. Criticism: These texts contain criticism of Elijah Muhammad in cold and precise terms just after the bombing of Malcolm X's house. He points out how he had not wanted to make a public spectacle but was being forced to tell the truth. He also clarifies his criticism of the civil rights leaders. While he wants to keep personal attacks out of the debate, preferring to carry on private communications to straighten personal things out, he argues in favor of public debate of ideological and political line. This is one of Malcolm X's greatest contributions to the Black liberation movement.

2. History: Malcolm was the greatest propagandist against Eurocentrism. This is one of his greatest positive influences from Elijah Muhammad. He was consistently raising the issues of historical distortion in world history, calling our attention to the African contributions and high standards of cultural development. He relied on the historical research of J. A. Rogers, Carter G. Woodson, as well as the unintentional revelations of important Eurocentric historians.

3. Politics of Naming: Another important lesson from the NOI was calling into question the name "Negro." They were responsible for the popular usage of the term "black people," and Malcolm in particular was responsible for getting us to use Afro-American or African American. Jesse Jackson was historically opportunist for not giving Malcolm X his proper recognition especially although he constantly gives Martin Luther King credit for his contributions. But Malcolm is not a national chauvinist because he points out in this text that when he says Afro-American he means this in its actual hemispheri-

cal reference, all of the Americas. When Jackson uses the term, he means it in the tradition of the hegemonic Monroe Doctrine, meaning the U.S.A. in this case—not white but Afro.

4. Imperialism: Malcolm continues to inform us that we are dealing with “an international Western power structure.” (127) This comes through in this text most dramatically when he tells the story of his attempt to enter France in February 1965 just before he was assassinated. They had left him in before, but this time they refused to admit him without explanation. Malcolm challenged them by saying he didn’t know that France had become a satellite of the U.S.A. His main point is that all of these powers are in cahoots with each other, and together constitute our common enemy.

The last speech in the book, made in Rochester, New York five days before his assassination, is a classic speech. In this speech, Malcolm makes a sweeping summary of his views, a virtual primer of his beliefs at their fullest point of development. Every student of black liberation politics should be familiar with this speech, and therefore should own and thoroughly read this book.