

# Malcolm X: The Last Speeches.

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MALCOLM X: The Last Speeches.

Do we measure activists' lives by the breadth of their hopes or their earnestness in trying to make them real? Or do we measure activists by where they actually end up, failures and disillusionments included? And how do we figure someone like Malcolm X?

In Malcolm's case, myth has long since taken the place of research in the imagination of Americans, black and white. Malcolm's myth, widely circulated in his posthumously published autobiography, makes him a very current African-American figure: the resistant seminationalist, a hero for the "lost and (now I'm) found" strain of gritty American individualism. In the popular view, Malcolm represents the real black thing; one's reaction to Malcolm's myth, then, becomes a measure of one's understanding of, or sympathy with, the "strong side" of black experience - the side that is ready to embrace other Americans without forfeiting any self-respect. Unfortunately, this neat [package](#) smoothes over significant details about Malcolm's life.

In March 1964, Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam, the organization that had both nurtured him into responsible adulthood and shaken America's political consciousness. The break was real. During the last eleven months of his life, Malcolm made an eye-opening pilgrimage to Africa and the Middle East, and he publicly renounced Elijah Muhammad's theology as unorthodox and racist. He also [began](#) pondering conceptual alternatives to the movement's black nationalism, eventually deciding to activate a human rights campaign in America, and to place new emphasis on brotherhood, internationalism, anti-imperialism and, most important, progressive action.

But never did he cease being, as is said in the vernacular, hard. After establishing the orthodox Muslim Mosque Inc., Malcolm formed the ecumenical Organization of Afro-American Unity (O.A.A.U.), and he gave it the slogan "By Any Means Necessary." He never failed to remind audiences that while he didn't advocate violence, he did believe in the right to self-protection, particularly in a country as racially inequitable as the United States. And while white liberals and black (dare I say it) integrationists like to stress his embrace of brotherhood, even a cursory examination of his speeches reveals that Malcolm never changed his mind about what the chief enemy was: white American racism.

In 1965 **Pathfinder Press** published *Malcolm X Speaks*, a collection of speeches, interviews and correspondence that, with one exception, are from the last year of his life. The editing of both that [book](#) and *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches* emphasizes Malcolm's political evolution; its obvious intent is to reinforce the notion that Malcolm was

loosening up, becoming more intellectually honest and, most significant, more willing to embrace white revolutionaries and traditional leftisms.

Malcolm X: The Last Speeches actually [offers](#) readers glimpses of more than that. The book's first two examples are standard Black Muslim fare, delivered in 1963 to predominantly white audiences at Michigan State University and the University of California at Berkeley. In the book's pair of radio interviews (December 1964), Malcolm distances himself from speeches like these, contending that he was only "parroting" Elijah Muhammad's propaganda. But as parrot propagandists go, Malcolm performed brilliantly, making points he would later alter but never abandon:

[The] new type [of black man] rejects  
the white man's Christian religion. He  
recognizes the real enemy. That Uncle  
Tom can't see his enemy. He thinks his  
friend is his enemy and his enemy is his  
friend. And he usually ends up loving  
his enemy, turning his other cheek to  
his enemy. But this new type, he  
doesn't turn the other cheek to anybody.  
He doesn't believe in any kind of  
peaceful suffering. He believes in  
obeying the law. He believes in respecting  
people. He believes in doing unto  
others as he would have done to himself.  
But at the same time, if anybody  
attacks him, he believes in retaliating if  
it costs him his life. And it is good for  
white people to know this. Because if

white people get the impression that  
Negroes all endorse this old turn-the-other-cheek  
cowardly philosophy of  
Dr. Martin Luther King, then whites  
are going to make the mistake of putting  
their hands on some black man,  
thinking that he's going to turn the  
other cheek, and he'll end up losing his  
hand and losing his life in the try.

[Commotion and laughter]

Malcolm is giving voice to this "new" type of black man; he is tapping into a rather traditional African-American will to self-determination and proclaiming his strength in terms anybody can understand and respect. In such talk one can witness the genesis of Malcolm's slogan, By Any Means Necessary, and observe the reason for his appeal to black and white audiences.

Yet behind Malcolm X's incredible ability to pick metaphors from the air, and behind his clarity and brutal earnestness, lurked a basic deception: Malcolm didn't believe a lot of what he was saying. In 1960, for instance, Elijah directed Malcolm to conduct secret talks with the Ku Klux Klan about the possibility of carving a black nation out of South Carolina. These negotiations made Malcolm uncomfortable - cutting deals with the blue-eyed devils simply did not sit well. But like any disciplined revolutionary, Malcolm felt he couldn't break ranks and did so only after internal politics and personal disillusionment forced him out.

In the last year of his life, Malcolm offered piecemeal explanations for his abrupt departure. Among these were what he described as the movement's willful lethargy and its racist unorthodoxy; these concerns surface with passionate cogency in the book's only gem, a speech Malcolm made the night after his house was firebombed (allegedly by members of Elijah's movement). Delivered on February 15, 1965, at Harlem's Audubon Ballroom - the site of his assassination less than a week later - these remarks show the profundity of his disappointment with the movement:

And there has been a conspiracy across  
the country on the part of many factions

of the press to suppress news that would open the eyes of the Muslims who are following Elijah Muhammad. They continue to make him look like he's a prophet somewhere who is getting some messages direct from God and is untouchable and things of that sort. I'm telling you the truth. But they do know that if something were to happen and all these brothers, their eyes were to come open, they would be right out here in every one of these civil rights organizations making these Uncle Tom Negro leaders stand up and fight like men instead of running around here nonviolently acting like women.

So they hope Elijah Muhammad remains as he is for a long time because they know that any organization that he heads, it will not do anything in the struggle that the black man is confronted with in this country. Proof of

which, look how violent they can get.

They were violent, they've been violent  
from coast to coast. Muslims, in the  
Muslim movement, have been involved  
in cold, calculated violence. And not at  
one time have they been involved in  
any violence against the Ku Klux Klan.

They're capable. They're qualified.

They're equipped. They know how to  
do it. But they'll never do it - only to

another brother. [Applause]

What throbs at bottom here is a very painful distress: Malcolm is rejecting, and has been rejected by, his spiritual/ political father. Elijah's movement made Malcolm, forming him even as he helped form the Nation. Like any good lieutenant, Malcolm served with his eyes open. He'd heard the rumors about Elijah's character, had sat across the table from the Klan and had also concealed any doubts that had occurred to him. For his faith Malcolm was given the truth, which hurt.

By the time he made that speech, Malcolm had traveled through newly postcolonial Africa, and thereby broadened and sharpened his thinking. His essential "Black Muslim" outrage, however, remained, only with complications. The problems clearly did not come from his broader understanding of internationalism or anticapitalism or brotherhood. Malcolm never had much time to investigate these ideas thoroughly, nor did he ever abandon the sexism attendant on his notions of black manhood, nor did he fool himself about the privileges whites enjoy in this country. Rather, Malcolm's new perspective was made more complicated by his realization that he hadn't known his friends from his enemies, just like the Uncle Tom house Negroes he harped on in his Black Muslim speeches. Where in his old scheme, after all, does one place Elijah? The awful and unavoidable truth is that he must be classed alongside other useful revolutionaries turned sorry despots, men seduced by the jeweled trappings of institutional power.

What emerges, then, as Malcolm's most significant final-year revelation is not his admission of the possibility of white good, but his encounter with the disillusioning reality of "new" Negro corruption. The Last Speeches records Malcolm's most significant postrevolutionary change: his realization that he could not be sure. Readers will be

reminded that the gun Malcolm holds in that famous photograph was being readied not for enemies who were white, but former comrades who were black.

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