Interrogating Malcolm X's "Ballot or the Bullet"

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Abstract

This article examines Malcolm X's 1964 speech titled the "Ballot or the Bullet." He used both managerial and confrontational rhetoric in this text; however, Malcolm X's background, the events preceding the speech, the themes Malcolm X used, and the pattern of the speech has led many people over the years to believe the rhetoric Malcolm X produced here was confrontational. Nevertheless, this work argues that this speech was overall managerial and that some of the ideas expressed in this speech are being used widely by people today on both sides of the political spectrum.

Keywords Malcolm X · "Ballot or the Bullet" · Rhetoric · Speech and Human Rights

Introduction

Debates surrounding the message content of African American¹ rhetoric and the goals rhetoricians had hoped to achieve are a time-honored tradition. One area that I find most interesting is that which involves African American rhetoric and Civil Rights, who may be denying Civil Rights, and the best way to obtain Civil Rights. A good example of this is Malcolm X's 1964 speech the "Ballot or the Bullet," delivered on April 3rd of that year at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. Considered one of Malcolm's most poignant and militant statements, the speech elicited an enormous amount of attention from the mass media as well as from members of the political establishment, most of which interpreted it as a call to arms for the purpose of the violent overthrow of the US government (Condit and Lucaites 1993b, p. 292). Republican Congressman Jack Miller of Iowa insisted that Malcolm X made irresponsible statements designed to promote bloodshed and violence (Condit and Lucaites 1993a, p. 199). While the *U.S. News and World Report* headline was "Broader Malcolm: His

¹The words African American, Blacks and Black American are used interchangeably according to sound and context as well as to avoid redundancy.

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Theme Now Is Violence.” *The Chicago Defender* reported “Negroes Need Guns, Declares Malcolm X” (Cone 1991, p. 195). However, the “Ballot or the Bullet” constitutes only one dimension in the complex rhetorical development of Malcolm X’s dissent from the American dream of equality, a dissent that ultimately entailed the rather peaceful goal of radically redrawing the ideological boundaries of American life to constitute a viable space for America’s Black citizens (Charland 1987, p. 141).

Others saw an evolution in Malcolm X’s philosophy and interpreted the speech in a way that was contrary to its reading by the mainstream press and its readers. Some who heard this address called it the best oratory Malcolm X ever gave. James Cone suggests “While the ‘bullet’ symbolized the continuity in Malcolm X’s thinking, the ‘ballot’ signaled an important change. It represented his move away from the narrow ‘skin-nationalism’ of the Black Muslims to an affirmation of blackness which enabled him to cooperate with Martin King and others in mainstream civil rights movement” (Cone 1991, p. 198). These conflicting interpretations of this speech bring to the forefront the complexity of African American rhetoric and the need to investigate and interpret thoroughly the messages being conveyed via this type of rhetoric. This article seeks to identify the reasons why messages such as Malcolm’s “the Ballot or The Bullet” lead to divergent interpretations, and thereby sheds light on the study of African American rhetoric, generally.²

This work identifies the lecture’s major themes: *The Enemy and the Conspiracy*, *Human Rights*, *American Themes Leaders and Violence*, and the concept of unity. These themes highlight the problems African Americans were facing at the time, the causes of those problems, and the necessary steps taken in order to eradicate those problems.

Confrontational and Managerial Aspects and Themes of the Speech

To the casual observer, the themes may appear confrontational³; however, a closer examination shows these themes have elements of both confrontational and managerial

² In order to assess the validity of said interpretations, this article interrogates the speech, and uses the Social Movement approach defined by Robert Cathcart in his essay “Movement: Confrontation As Rhetorical Form” to determine the ways in which Malcolm X’s “Ballot or the Bullet” may be perceived as both confrontational and managerial (Cathcart 1990). This research defines what is meant by the contrast between confrontational and managerial rhetoric and applies this conceptual framework to the speech. Furthermore, this essay extends this line of inquiry, and offers a contrasting analysis of the “Ballot or the Bullet,” that differs from prevailing perceptions. This article also advances the argument that Malcolm’s rhetoric can neither be characterized solely as confrontational nor managerial, but rather a subtle combination of the two. To be clear, it is not uncommon for speeches to be received differently by different audiences and thus have different effects. Cathcart’s definition of the Social Movement approach has two elements: (1) Confrontational rhetoric: which challenges the basic values of the system, and in the end wants it abolished, and (2) managerial rhetoric: used by individuals are still demanding a change to the existing order. Cathcart argues that confrontational rhetoric occurs only in special and limited circumstances, such as periods of societal breakdown, or when moral underpinnings are called into question (Cathcart 1990, p. 364). In his work, Cathcart used confrontational to mean that form of human behavior labeled “agnostics,” pertaining to ritual conflicts (p. 362). Cathcart’s definition is helpful in unraveling the complexity of the “Ballot or the Bullet” thus enabling readers and viewers to process the speech as more than just revolutionary rhetoric.

³ Webster’s dictionary defines confrontational as the act of confronting, to present or put facts or evidence to (someone).

rhetoric. They support and justify violence in some form or another, at least as a last resort; nevertheless, in each theme, Malcolm also supported the use of the system first (a managerial approach) to help gain Civil Rights for Blacks. The endorsement of violence may appear confrontational, but from a different standpoint, one that is not unquestioningly committed to “nonviolence,” the system may in fact require the use of violence in order to achieve justice. Thinking of violence as a strategy necessitated and rewarded by the system would have made Malcolm’s approach appear managerial. In this way, the “Ballot or the Bullet’s” major themes can also be characterized as managerial rhetoric.⁴

Ballot or the Bullet

The “Ballot or the Bullet” was widely perceived as a confrontational, stirring up strong feelings in many white Americans. What contributed to this effect in no small measure was the way Malcolm used historical figures, current events, and certain aspects of American history to buttress his ideas. The title of Malcolm’s speech alluded to a speech that President Abraham Lincoln made on May 19, 1865, in which he proclaimed that the ballot is stronger than the bullet. For Lincoln, the bullet was not an option. Malcolm appropriated Lincoln’s statement and outfitted it for a particular audience. He believed the bullet to be a legitimate and a necessary option for African American survival. In fact, Malcolm said to everyone, “It’s got to be the ballot or the bullet. If you’re afraid to use an expression like that, you should get on out of the country, you should get back in the cotton patch, you should get back in the alley” (Paragraph 13). The words that Malcolm used such as “we’re going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet,” and “1964 threatens to be the most explosive year America has ever witnessed,” suggested that America was at a crossroads—that freedom, justice, and equality would either be achieved peacefully via the franchise or the country would be forced to deal with a generation of younger African Americans who were prepared to achieve freedom “by any means necessary,” even if that meant picking up the gun. Indeed, it is this threat of violence that prompted the media to frame Malcolm’s speech as confrontational.

However, in his first inaugural address, President Lincoln stated “If by the mere force of numbers a majority should deprive a minority of any clearly written constitutional right, it might, in any moral point of view justify revolution” (Fehrenbacher 1989, p. 219). In this missive, Lincoln was merely echoing the *Declaration of Independence*. Even though Lincoln undoubtedly preferred the ballot, he nevertheless supported, in accord with American revolutionary history, the use of violence if any group of peoples’ constitutional rights were being denied them. It appears then that Lincoln supported violence as a weapon in the face of oppression, provided all other means of redress were exhausted. From this larger historical perspective, Malcolm’s speech, like Lincoln’s, justifies any violent action taken to ensure that everyone would not be denied god given rights. Still, when Malcolm X referred to the phrase “The Ballot or the Bullet,” he was

⁴ In an effort to provide a more nuanced and illuminating interpretation of the “Ballot or the Bullet,” I also discuss the rhetorical strategy used by Malcolm within the framework for Black revolutionary rhetoric developed by Molefi Asante (formerly Arthur L. Smith) in his book *Rhetoric of black Revolution*.

primarily advocating a peaceful method to achieve his objectives just like many Americans had done in the past. Yet, at the same time, he also made it abundantly clear that if people could not achieve their goals by peaceful means, then violent actions must be taken, just as whites had done in the course of creating the USA.

By 1964, 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans were still being deprived of their inalienable rights. Given the plight of African Americans, from Lincoln's perspective on revolution, violence would have been justified as a form of redress. As 1964 was an election year, Malcolm observed "the politicians are coming into the black community and making promises which they do not intend to keep. As they nourish these dissatisfactions, it can only lead to one thing an explosion." Still, Malcolm took a managerial stance by encouraging Black people to use the system to bring about change peacefully, for because, 1964 was an election year and the current administration relied heavily on the African American community's vote as it did in 1960, the African American community was well-positioned to leverage its power. Malcolm cautioned Black voters: "It's the year when all of the white politicians will be back in the so-called Negro community jiving you and me for some votes. The year when all of the white political crooks will be right back in your and my community with their false promises, building up our hopes for a letdown." Despite the loyalty shown the Democratic party over the past four years, Black had little to show for it. Significant Civil Rights legislation had not been passed and what laws were passed were watered-down so as not to alienate the southern white vote. Malcolm X reminded the Black community of all the promises that had been made and broken over the years by the Democratic party and the necessary measures that needed to be taken if such a betrayal continued.

These statements implied that if some drastic and significant changes are not made by those in power, there may be violence of a scope that has never been seen before in America. Thus, Malcolm X asserted that "the type of black man on the scene todayjust doesn't intend to turn the other cheek any longer, the false promises of the politicians, which result in rising expectations, will lead to an explosion." In his view, that explosion would be justified because the "22 million black people are the victims of Democracy." One could argue that the constant threat of violence throughout Malcolm's speech was a ploy, possibly designed to compel Congress to quicken the passage of meaning Civil Rights legislation. From such a perspective, the bullet would not have been a viable option for Malcolm X. It was unrealistic to assume that most Black people in America were going to revolt, and Malcolm understood that. The overwhelming majority of Black that were working to bring about change in America were doing so through traditional channels. Most people who participated in the Civil Rights movement practiced the nonviolence approach. Even though Blacks were subjected to violence, they rarely acted out in the same manner against the government.

Malcolm repeatedly argued that the White establishment was only willing to cooperate with the Black community when violence was a serious possibility. This could account for the "violent" rhetoric he and many African Americans have espoused throughout the years. One of the typical rhetorical strategies of African American activists which Malcolm used was that of invoking "revolution." Some people believed that Blacks could neither be assimilated into a racist society, nor could they obtain their fully deserved freedom, humanity, and a good life by withdrawing into a separate Black territory as Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam had argued (Golden 1971 p. 44).

According to this view, Black people had seen this nation become wealthy due to their labor and concluded that if they could not achieve their goal by complete separation or assimilation, then a new society must be formed (p. 44). This rhetoric of revolution argues that only by removing power from those who have created this racist society and giving it to those who can use it properly will Black people ever reach their goals (p. 44).

The message for Black people is that the use of violence, either as civil disobedience (if there is a such a thing) or in the form of other more assertive methods, is legitimate and necessary (Golden 1971, p. 45). The message to White people is that it is their choice whether the revolution will be violent or not (p. 45). The hope was that the threat of violence would more likely influence the White community to cease its discrimination against the Black community, than any talk of love thy neighbor and turn the other cheek. Black people were becoming more and more disenchanted with the apparent ineffectiveness of the nonviolence approach. In this light, Malcolm may have been using peoples' discontent with the approach to help break up the logjam in Congress that prevented the passage of significant Civil Rights legislation. Even though Black people as a group would not have prevailed in a violent confrontation, the possibility of violence embarrassed the USA internationally, and caused major problems within certain parts of the country, especially the South. With the threat of violence, Malcolm rhetorically set out to force the hand of the Johnson administration. Whether or not he believed that such a warned would be taken seriously by those in power is not within the purview of this article.

The Enemy and the Conspiracy

The broken promises, the contradictory actions taken by government actors, and America's flat out refusal to recognize Black peoples' rights as supposedly guaranteed by the US Constitution led many Blacks community to believe that there was a concerted and systematic effort on the part of the power elite and racist whites to keep Blacks subjugated. The USA projected itself to the world as a beacon of Democracy, yet it does not include all of its citizens in the process. As Malcolm stated in his speech, "If you and I were Americans, there'd be no problem. Those Honkies that just got off the boat, they're already Americans; Polacks are already Americans; the Italian refugees are already Americans. Everything that came out of Europe, every blue-eyed thing, is already an American. They don't have to pass civil rights legislation to make a Polack an American."

Malcolm identified the enemy as White America. He took an overtly confrontational stance when he blamed the US government, the Democratic party leadership, the White race, and more specifically President Johnson for the perpetuating the exploitation, degradation, and oppression of African Americans. He thus attacked the power structure and called for the removal of some political officials from office. He argued that the party that Black people voted for to protect their interest was inherently working against them. Molefi Asante (1970) calls this particular strategy of revolutionary rhetoric "objectification." Objectification is the use of language to direct the grievances of a particular group toward another collective body such as a nation, political party, or race (p. 29). This strategy is used to show that a certain group is responsible for the injustices that another group has to suffer. By targeting the US government, its representatives, and the White race, Malcolm demonstrates that the problems that

Black people were facing were not going to be solved easily and may not be solved peacefully.

With this indictment of that sector of “White America” that is presumed to be most friendly to Black aspirations, Malcolm introduced the idea of a conspiracy against the Black race. He carefully plotted out the actions of the Democratic party and demonstrated that the government had always been joined in a concentrated effort to deny Blacks their constitutional rights. By showing why he is justified in having no faith in the government, the Black revolutionist is capable of contending that the government is engaged in a conspiracy. Many African American rhetoricians have used this theme to show the contradictory nature of their government: White politicians are playing a game to suppress Blacks by saying one thing and doing another (Smith 1970, p. 58).

Malcolm argued that the Democratic party was knowingly and willingly preventing any kind of Civil Rights legislation from being passed, but he also presented a plan to end this stalemate. Malcolm argued that this structure allowed the Dixiecrats to control the government and the reason why they had that power to obstruct justice was that they came from states where voting rights legislation had been violated. In order to develop this solution, he presented a more detailed analysis of the problem: “The Dixiecrats in Washington D.C. control key committees within the government and the reason why they control these key committees is because they have seniority. The reason why they have seniority is because they come from states where Blacks cannot vote,” he declared. The conclusion, stark in 1964, is in accord more with our own contemporary understanding of Constitutional law: “This is not even a government that’s based on democracy. It is not a government that is made up of representatives of the people. Half of the people in the South can’t even vote Half of the senators and congressmen who occupy these key positions in Washington D.C., are there illegally, are there unconstitutionally.”

Malcolm attacked the heart of the Democratic party when he advocated removing anybody who was in office that came from states where voting rights had been violated. But note, he was advocating the use of the system to take action against those individuals who were ushered into office by whites largely because Blacks were kept disenfranchised. And because Blacks were kept from voting, the election of those officials was not the result of a truly Democratic practice: “These Senators and Congressmen actually violate the constitutional amendments that guarantee the people of that particular state or county the right to vote. The constitution itself has within it the machinery to expel any representative from a state where the voting rights of the people are violated. .. In fact, when you expel them, you don’t need new legislation, because they will be replaced by black representatives from counties and districts where the Black man is in the majority, not in the minority.”

Malcolm continued with an indictment of the government referring to President Johnson as a “Southern Cracker” and a “Tricky Blue Eyed Liberal.” He was of the opinion that Johnson could not be trusted. He attacked Johnson for not denouncing the Dixiecrats, making Johnson out to be Black people’s main villain. This rhetorical strategy of revolutionary rhetoric is called “vilification,” which is the use of language to degrade an opponents’ person, actions, or ideas (Smith 1970, p. 26). In using this strategy, the rhetorician wants the audience to disapprove of the opposition’s representative. This is done by exposing corruption, inefficiencies, lies, and injustice (Smith 1970, p. 27). One way in which Malcolm exposed the duplicity of the administration

was by pointing out that Johnson worked closely with US Senator Richard Russell Jr. of Georgia, the Democrat that spearheaded the filibuster against Civil Rights legislation and co-author, along with Strom Thurmond, of The Declaration of Constitutional Principles (known informally as the Southern Manifesto⁵). “If he’s (Lyndon B. Johnson) for civil rights, let him go in there right now and declare himself. Let him go in there and denounce the Southern branch of his party. Let him go in there right now and take a moral stand—right now, not later”. Although some may read this passage as confrontational, Malcolm seemingly takes a managerial stance here, suggesting a peaceful way to help pass significant Civil Rights legislation. In fact, he claimed that if the existing political system had just followed its own already existing rules, such legislation would not have been needed. According to Malcolm, such a compliance would have put more Blacks in office.

Malcolm knew that the Dixiecrats (or anyone else) would not be expelled from office for the violation of voters’ rights, he wanted Blacks to be prepared to take certain actions, in the event their needs and demands were not being addressed by their so-called representatives. If Blacks failed to understand this, the exploitation and degradation of the Black community on the part of the government would persist.

Human Rights

It was apparent to Malcolm that the Black community had taken every legal step within the USA in order to achieve Civil Rights, but their biggest obstacle was the institution that was supposed to be helping them, the US government. He felt that in order to achieve Civil Rights for Blacks in the USA, the government would have to be pressured or coerced into ameliorating Black suffering. Outside help was needed in the form of the United Nations. Malcolm therefore proposed that people of color around the world join with the Black Americans in seeking human rights. Confronted with the combined efforts from people of color throughout the world, the USA would have to concede to Black peoples’ demands.

Malcolm imagined a new way to frame and further the fight for Civil Rights. He sought to expand the struggle for Civil Rights into a struggle for Human Rights. He argued that Human Rights are recognized by every nation in the world and that the USA should be held accountable in the United Nations for violating the rights of Black Americans. Accordingly, Malcolm advocated redefining the Civil Rights struggle as a Human Rights struggle because Civil Rights was merely a domestic issue which fell within the jurisdiction of the USA. Hence, when Blacks took their grievances before a governmental body, they were taking their problems to the perpetrators of that misery: “When you expand the Civil Rights struggle to the level of Human rights, you can then take the case of the Black man in this country before the nations in the UN.³ You can take it before the General Assembly. You can take Uncle Sam before a world court. But the only level you can do it is on the level of Human rights”.

⁵ The Southern Manifesto was written in the spring of 1956, in the 84th US Congress, in opposition to racial integration in public places. The manifesto was signed by 101 congressmen 99 Southern Democrats and two Republicans). The document was crafted to counter the 1954 landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Topeka, Kansas.

This part of the speech can be considered confrontational, for the expansion of the Civil Rights issue to a Human Rights concern could have been viewed as a way to invite outside intervention to deal with an issue that many considered a domestic matter. This kind of outside intervention could be seen as a violation of sovereignty and possibly leading to a possibility of violence as it did in many other countries. If there had been widespread discussion of outside intervention it would have, no doubt shamed the so-called leader of the free world, before the United Nations, an institution in whose establishment the USA was centrally involved. The USA had taken such a strong moral stance against human rights violations in other countries around the world such as Russia, South Africa, China, and Russia, for example. Malcolm's effort would have humiliated the USA by couching America as no better than those countries mentioned, especially Russia with which it was engaged in a "Cold War."

Raising such a prospect was certainly a confrontational strategy, yet also managerial in some ways. Malcolm was advocating the use of an entity in which the USA played a major role in establishing. In fact, the United Nations had faced this issue before. Almost twenty years earlier, on October 23, 1947, the NAACP submitted a petition of grievances to the United Nations calling attention to the long history of cultural deprivation suffered by Blacks in America (Berman 1970, p. 65). However, the United Nations refused to investigate. Still, the US government was embarrassed by the adverse publicity it received from the NAACP's petition and Attorney General Tom Clark remarked that he was "humiliated" that a group of Americans could not find equitable treatment at home (Berman 1970 p. 66). Even though the involvement of the United Nations might have cause great difficulty and embarrassment for the USA, Malcolm here advocated a peaceful method to help bring about a solution to Black exploitation. Military action would and could not have been used by the United Nations, as the USA was critically involved in its formation and it did not have a standing armed force under own control. Most importantly, what Malcolm was advocating was an action that had been taken before by an organization (NAACP) that always worked well within the laws of the USA.

Malcolm saw such an expansion of the Civil Rights issue into one of Human Rights as an utmost necessity for the Black community. Even though the Black community was a minority in the USA, worldwide, the people of color were the majority and it was important to put the USA before a world stage where the people of color could exert their influence and overcome the injustices committed by the White world. Forging new alliances, the Black community would have been able to take their plight to the world community and have the USA judged in that forum. Malcolm believed that the Black community could win in the halls of the United Nations, because African Americans would have the people of color throughout the world supporting their cause.

American Themes and Leaders, and the Justification of Violence

Along with his indictment of the denial of Freedom and Human Rights Malcolm presents the idea of justified violence. He often argued vehemently for "revolution," and as he repeatedly pointed out, revolutions, including the heralded American Revolution, are never "nonviolent" (Condit & Lucaites 1993b, p. 302). We have already seen how he buttressed this point by incorporating the rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln. By using this and other historically significant themes, Malcolm employs part of the

strategy of “mythication.” One aspect of “mythication” is the use of history itself as an instrument of persuasion (Smith 1970, p. 36). The black rhetor wants to demonstrate that his agitation is sanctioned by history, because great agitators of the past have endeavored to establish justice, create equality, and build dignity (p. 36).

Malcolm believed that every nation, race, or religion had a right to defend itself if it were subjugated to wonton violence and if the government that was sworn to protect them was unwilling or unable to do so. On May 21, 1964, upon arriving home after extended visits to Africa and the Middle East, Malcolm found himself revisiting this topic for the umpteenth time when he was asked his position on the role of armed self-defense in the struggle for Black liberation (Rummel 1988, p. 18). Malcolm was quick to point out contradictions in the way the press—mainly the white press—writes about the issue of self-defense in the case of racial attacks (p. 18). Malcolm reiterated “The only thing that I’ve ever said is that in areas where the government has proven itself either unwilling or unable to defend the lives and the property of Negroes, it’s time for Negroes to defend themselvesIf the white man doesn’t want the black man buying rifles and shotguns, then let the government do its job. That’s All” (Paragraph 55). Malcolm’s words show that he did not advocate violence for the sake of violence; nevertheless, violence may be necessary for Black people to defend themselves. White people’s refusal to acknowledge the right of blacks to defend themselves against persons who violated their humanity was perhaps the main reason that Malcolm could never accept Dr. King’s philosophy of nonviolence and its capacity to prick the moral conscience of whites (Cone 1994, p. 173). Malcolm was not alone, as time went by, many civil rightsers who had once committed themselves to nonviolence were wondering aloud if whites indeed had a conscience.

Despite the grim reality, many Black and White leaders in the 1960s believed that Black people could and would achieve civil rights in a peaceful manner. However, Malcolm talked about the history of violent actions against blacks and around the world that the US government supported, as John Patrick Henry did in 1775 about the transgressions of the British government. Malcolm reminded the people about some of the violent acts the USA had perpetrated around the world like the Korean War, and the war with Japan. Malcolm also pointed to the common horrid experience that most Black people had with the police when they try to exercise their god given rights. Malcom very carefully described how Black people took all of the necessary means to achieve civil rights by using the political system and how the needs of Black people were not just being ignored but met with violence.

In his speech Patrick Henry had argued “that this Colony be immediately put into a posture of defense” and a committee draft a plan “for embodying, arming, and disciplining such a Number of Men as may be sufficient for that purpose.” “A well-regulated Militia composed of Gentlemen and Yeomen is the natural Strength and only Security of a free Government” (Mayer 1991, p. 243). Even though there were still those who believed the conflict between Great Britain and the Colonies could be resolved without violence, Henry remained unconvinced. During his speech, Henry claimed it was only natural for people to shut their eyes to the painful truth, but he wasn’t going to. Henry argued that Great Britain should be judged by its past actions (Mayer 1991, p. 244).

As Malcolm did later, Henry reviewed the dispute between the two sides, and pointed out some of the violent actions that Great Britain had committed against the

Colonies and claimed there was no longer any room for hope; the colonies no longer had a choice (Mayer 1991, pp. 244–245). At the conclusion of the speech, Henry cried out “Give me Liberty or Give me Death.” With this statement, Henry made clear his willingness to sacrifice himself for this cause and in so doing urged others to adopt a similar disposition.

Malcolm also refers to the Declaration of Independence to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the actions taken by the US government. The Declaration of Independence was intended to be an expression of the American mind and give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion (Mayer 1994, p. 25). Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers of this country wanted to establish a new government based on the authority of the people (p. 40). The founding fathers believed that a social contract was made between the government and its citizens, and if the government did not live up to its part of the bargain then the people have a right to abandon the broken contract. Malcolm is only advocating using the same methods and principles on which the US government was founded. Malcolm implied throughout his speech that the history of slavery, and many of the atrocities that Blacks have suffered through and continue to endure, gave them the right to abandon the contract.

John Locke, whose ideas helped construct some of the values the USA was founded on, claimed that some basic natural rights and duties are to respect life, liberty, and property (Medina 1990, p. 30). According to Locke, a legitimate government is any government that respects natural rights (p. 38). If this is the case, then there is general consent to obey such a government as long as we openly or tacitly consent to it, provided it does not violate natural rights (p. 38). Given this premise, Blacks were not obliged to obey the government because the government violated their natural rights. Once the government violates the contract, then the citizens (even those who are Black) have the right to use violence in order to change the government or establish a new one.

Locke’s theory about a political society leads to the Declaration of Independence and the formation of this country. The Declaration of Independence states

That all men are created equal.... with certain unalienable rights.... that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it.... prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.

Malcolm demonstrated that the US government had not met the terms of the contract, and as a result, just as the colonies abandoned their contract with the British crown, the Black Americans were well within their rights to do the same.

Unity

In order for the Black Americans to achieve freedom, justice, and equality, whether it be via the political process or by violence, a united front was essential. If the leaders of

the Civil Rights movement were not open to differing viewpoints, the movement would be successful according to Malcolm. For many Black revolutionaries, it was clear that in order to rid themselves of the yoke of oppression, the Black masses must join themselves together so that they can speak with one voice (Smith 1970, p. 59). Malcolm also used a strategy called “legitimation,” which is the revolutionist’s way of explaining and justifying the activist’s involvement within a movement. If violence breaks out in the course of advancing the movement, the activist will explain that these actions would never have occurred had the opposition had listened (p. 41). In this speech, Malcolm justified any action taken by Black people because they were only asking for what was rightfully theirs’, consequently certain actions needed to be taken if Blacks were going to rid themselves, once and for all, of the yoke of oppression that had strangled them for more than four hundred years.

On the importance of unity Malcolm states

I’m not here to argue or discuss anything that we differ about, because it’s time for us to submerge our differences and realize that it is best for us to first see that we have the same problem, a common problem—a problem that will make you catch hell whether you’re a Baptist, or a Methodist, or a Muslim, or a nationalist. Whether you’re educated or illiterate, whether you live on the boulevard or in the alley, you’re going to catch hell just like I am. We’re all in the same boat and we all are going to catch the same hell from the same man.

Malcolm was more than ready to collect on his investment. According to Malcolm, the way Blacks were going to collect on their investment was through Black Nationalism (Paragraphs 42–45). He explained the political philosophy of Black Nationalism means, “that the black man should control the politics and the politicians in his own community. The black man in the black community has to be re-educated into the science of politics so he will know what politics is supposed to bring him in return.” Malcolm believed that Black Nationalism would compel the Black community to re-evaluate itself. Black Nationalism was supposed to create a special bond among Blacks. According to Malcolm, the gospel of Black Nationalism could have been preached in any organization. Black Nationalism was not intended to threaten the existence of any organization, but rather to create the kind of unity that would enable them to come together in search of political and economic power.

Malcolm saw equality as based on power (Condit and Lucaites 1993a, p. 193). In his autobiography, Malcolm said “The black man never can become independent and recognized as a human being who is truly equal with other human beings until he has what they have, and until he is doing for himself what others are doing for themselves” (Malcolm X and Haley 1964, p. 275). Some Black revolutionist believed as long as White people had economic, political, and military power exclusively, it would be impossible to consider the Blacks as truly equal; at most, they could be the recipients of benevolent paternalism (Smith 1970, p. 49).

The promotion of Black Nationalism can be classified under the rhetorical strategy of “separation.” This strategy is based on the assumption that the prejudice aimed at the Black community is derived from insurmountable color differences and that therefore, it is futile to engage in rhetoric aimed at convincing the White of the inherent equality of the races (Golden 1971, p. 43). Proponents of Black Nationalism, of which Malcolm

was one, believed that it was impossible for Whites and Blacks to live together peacefully, and that living with nonwhites would be more desirable than an integrated society (pp. 43–44). The kind of separation advocated varies depending on the messenger. Black Nationalism can be promoted by asking for legislative efforts such as those aimed at the passage of bills calling for urban self-determination, or the by creation of all-black political-economic units out of former ghettos such as Harlem, Watts, or the Southside of Chicago (p. 44).

Here again, this part of the speech can be considered managerial because Malcolm was encouraging Black people to work within the system to acquire economic, political, and social power. Some of Malcolm's ideas are similar to those of Booker T. Washington, who in many people's view espoused a rather conciliatory rhetoric. Washington believed that Black Americans should work toward equal status in American society by gaining economic power through vocational training and diligent industrial pursuits and by working within the system rather than challenging or attempting to agitate that system (Harris and Kennicott 1971 p. 48). In an article titled "The Negro and the Signs of Civilization" printed in the Tuskegee Student Newspaper, November 9, 1901, Booker T. Washington said:

"There are certain visible signs of civilization and strength which the world demands that each individual or race exhibit before it is taken seriously into consideration in the affairs of the world. Unless these visible evidences of ability and strength are forthcoming, mere abstract talking and mere claiming of 'rights' amount to little" (Wintz 1996, p. 41).

Later, Washington goes on to say that the possession of property is an evidence of self-sacrifice, thrift, character, and purpose and anyone who owns property has a deep interest in the nation's politics. These are the signs of highest civilization. The Negro must possess these or be debarred (Wintz 1996, p. 42). According to Washington it is up to the White race to help the Black race to obtain these qualities or the nation will never succeed (pp. 42, 43).

Like Booker T. Washington, Malcolm believed that the Black community must possess some of these qualities; if not, they will never achieve a status equal to that of Whites. With the achievement of monetary gains, the Black community would increase its political power and most likely become more knowledgeable about politics in general. Malcolm was also asking Black people to rely on their own abilities because the USA was not going to answer for the injustices committed against Blacks. Black Nationalism was in essence just racial self-determination. Black Nationalism was a restructuring of power. It would have given the Black community more power over their politics and politicians, their economy, and their social situation (Paragraphs 41–45). When Jesse Jackson formed the Rainbow Coalition, he adopted Malcolm's notion of equality as "reciprocity" (Jackson 1987, p. 111, 277). The goals of Black Nationalism are closely related to the goals of the Rainbow Coalition. However, the Rainbow Coalition included members of all races. The Rainbow Coalition is a political movement of all the people who have worked to help build this country but find its imperfections still in place (Daniels 1988, p. 30). The goal of Jackson's Rainbow Coalition was to bring together all the disparate groups in America into one brightly colored coalition. Even though Malcolm supported the idea of a separate nation for

Blacks, he was not advocating it in the “Ballot or the Bullet.” Black Nationalism was not primarily a separatist movement, its philosophy was one of empowerment.

Malcolm strongly believed that Black Nationalism would revitalize the Black community and help it overcome some of the ill-effects that injustices such as slavery have had on Blacks for hundreds of years. Black Nationalism meant that the Black community should control their political, economic, and social future just as White America does. Malcolm claimed that Black Nationalists needed to organize in the way that Billy Graham had done. From Malcolm’s standpoint, Black Nationalists needed to control their own institutions, starting with the schools, if not, then the kids will leave schools with crippled minds (Paragraph 52).

Patterns of African American Rhetoric

To say that Malcolm was not the typical minister is an understatement. Many of the ideas that Malcolm expressed in the “Ballot or the Bullet” were intended to embolden the Black by preaching messages of unity and empowerment. Andrew A. King, author of *The Rhetorical Legacy of the Black Church*, submits that the historic orientation of the Black church has been one of passivity and acceptance of the status quo. The pressures on the church have been such that it could only satisfy the desires of its constituency for assimilation in another worldly or mystical context (King 1971, p. 181). It was expected to endorse earthly dependency and weakness and provide a safe outlet for aggressive feelings in emotionalism (p. 181). The minister, rather than making a positive affirmation of the spiritual values of his constituency, has been the unwitting messenger of white expectations ... whites have seen to it that the values of fatalism and accommodation were actively propagandized (p. 181). Black intellectuals had been highly critical of the church for just that reason (p. 180). Malcolm’s “The Ballot or the Bullet”, on the other hand, demanded that the Black community be more assertive and if necessary violent in order to secure what was rightfully theirs’ at birth. To be clear, when Malcolm talked of picking up the gun or engaging in physical violence, he made sure to couch it in response to any injustices inflicted upon Blacks.

Malcolm developed aspects within this speech that parallel the traditional African American rhetoric. However, a characteristic which Malcolm did not duplicate is the approach to speech structure prevalent in African American rhetoric. A study conducted by Lyndrey A. Niles concluded that it was not possible to arrive at a set pattern of organization in traditional Black preaching (Niles 1984, p. 47). Niles did, however, find that Black preaching seems to require the speaker to touch the deep emotions of the audience very early in his sermon (p. 47). In contrast to this highly flexible approach to structure, Malcolm employed a traditional set of designed organizational patterns in his speech. Since Malcolm was trying to urge his Black audience to take a supposedly more confrontational role in the Civil Rights movement by encouraging them to take part in Black Nationalism, he needed a general pattern that would indicate a clear need and justification for a particular course of action. This pattern is made evident by the continuous use of the phrase “The Ballot or the Bullet” and by the presentation of clearly marked sequence of problem, cause, and solution.

From Problem to Solution

Early in the speech, Malcolm undertook a general discussion of the problems African Americans were facing. The first issue Malcolm addressed was how African Americans had been shut out of the political process. Malcolm stated “The same government that you go abroad to fight for and die for is the government that is in a conspiracy to deprive you of your economic opportunities, deprive you of decent housing, deprive you of decent education.” According to Malcolm, the reason African-Americans were denied their Constitutional rights was because the government and more specifically the Democratic party were not only unresponsive to the needs of the African-American community, but sanctioned the racist policies practiced by American society. Malcolm exclaimed that even though the Black community helped put the current administration into office, the administration turned a blind eye to those problems that plagued the Black community (Paragraph 11). Exacerbating the problem were those who Black leaders were claiming that progress had been made.

Malcolm saw very little difference between the Johnson administration and the Eisenhower administration. Malcolm pointed out that not only was Johnson a southerner, but that he hailed from the states of Texas. Malcolm stated “Texas is a lynch state. It is in the same breath as Mississippi, no different: only they lynch you in Texas with a Texas accent and lynch you in Mississippi with a Mississippi accent. And these Negro leaders have the audacity to go and have some coffee in the White House with a Texan, a Southern cracker—that’s all he is—and then come out and tell you and me that he’s going to be better for us because, since he’s from the South, he knows how to deal with the Southerners” (Paragraph 11). Malcolm made clear that the Democratic Party was no friend of the Negro. As far as he was concerned, the Democrats were just as bad as the Republicans.

Malcolm’s proposed methods to help solve the problems were combined with reminders of the possibility of a violent explosion. Malcolm reminded the audience that the possibility of violence was very much alive because of the new militancy of the Black youth. Malcolm stated “And now you’re facing a situation where the young Negro’s coming up. They don’t want to hear that ‘turn-the-other-cheek’ stuff, no... There’s new thinking coming in. There’s new strategy coming in” (Paragraph 24). Malcolm viewed the movement as the quest for equality of opportunity and emphasized that Blacks were justified in this endeavor. Malcolm stated “Well we’re justified in seeking civil rights, if it means equality of opportunity, because all we’re doing there is trying to collect on our investment” (Paragraph 25). Nevertheless, Malcolm offered a confrontation solution in this context as well, when he said the Black community should do whatever was necessary to fight segregation, to obtain equality of opportunity (Paragraphs 28–30). He said that even though segregation had been outlawed, the US government continued to support its practice. Malcolm stated “Whenever you are going after something that is yours, you are within your legal rights to lay claim to it. And anyone who puts forth any effort to deprive you of that which is yours, is breaking the law, is a criminal.”

Throughout the speech, Malcolm kept hammering home the matter of Human Rights, arguing that making the Civil Rights issue a Human Rights issue would give the Black community new allies all over the world (Paragraph 31). Malcolm believed that Blacks were in a war that had to be fought on many fronts. Not surprisingly,

Malcolm raised the specter of guerrilla warfare within the USA, largely because it was prevailing all over the world. Malcolm claimed that this kind of war was not suited for the White nations of the world, which gave the people of color a decisive advantage. Malcolm submitted “And the white man can’t win another war fighting on the ground. Those days are over. The black man knows it, and the yellow man knows it. So, they engage him in guerrilla warfare. That is not his style.”

The last solution Malcolm proposed was also confrontational. Unless the race problem could be settled peacefully by President Johnson, Malcolm strongly suggested that the next March on Washington assume a more aggressive posture. Malcolm implied that lives would be lost the next time the Black community marched on Washington. This can only be prevented by the government if it did what was legally and morally right. Malcolm stated “And this time, they’re not going like they went last year. They’re not going singing We Shall Overcome. They’re not going with white friends. They’re not going with placards already painted for them. They’re not going with round-trip tickets. They’re going with one-way tickets” (Paragraph 58). “And if they don’t want that non-violent army going down there, tell them to bring the filibuster to a halt” (Paragraph 59).

“The Ballot or the Bullet” and the Threat of Confrontation

The theme as pointed out dominates the introduction of the speech and is followed by “whatever means necessary.” The use of repetition of this key phrase added strongly to the confrontational tone to the speech not only in confrontational sections but even when it was used in passages that were overall managerial. Malcolm answered the question, “The Negro Revolt, and Where Do We Go From Here?,” with the “Ballot or the Bullet.” Malcolm X reintroduced the “Ballot or the Bullet” minutes into the speech (paragraph) when describing the problems faced by the Black community. He began the paragraph by stating “If we don’t do something real soon, I think you’ll have to agree that we’re going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It’s one or the other in 1964.”

Also, the theme plays a central role when Malcolm described what and who caused the problems with which Blacks were saddled. Malcolm then reintroduced the theme when he described what he called the government conspiracy to deny the Black community their rights. Malcolm used the phrase in a way to let the government know that the conspiracy had been revealed and if it continued, violence would erupt. Malcolm stated “So it’s time in 1964 to wake up. And when you see them coming up with that kind of conspiracy, let them know your eyes are open. And let them know you got something else that’s wide open too. It’s got to be the ballot or the bullet. The ballot or the bullet” (Paragraph 13).

Malcolm concludes the speech with the phrase the “Ballot or the Bullet” after he has again denounced President Johnson for not taking a firm moral stand against racism and claims the President will be responsible for any violence that may occur. Malcolm states “If he waits too long, brothers and sisters, he will be responsible for letting a condition develop in this country which will create a climate that will bring seeds up out of the ground with vegetation on the end of them looking like something these people never dreamt of. In 1964, it’s the ballot or the bullet” (Paragraph 59). By

repeating the “Ballot or the Bullet” in these situations, Malcolm made it clear that the bullet was a legitimate option. The use of the phrase was necessary in order to show how far the Black community was willing to go in its struggle for Civil Rights.

In other parts of the speech, Malcolm substituted words or other phrases to stress the likelihood of violence. Malcolm used the phrase “Let your dying be reciprocal” and “What is good for the goose is good for the gander.” Malcolm pointed out that if someone is going to attack another person who is attempting to exercise Civil Rights, then that person must respond in the same manner. If not, oppression will persist. In this context Malcolm used “Any time you know you’re within the law, within your legal rights, within your moral rights, in accord with justice, then die for what you believe in. But don’t die alone. Let your dying be reciprocal. This is what is meant by equality. What is good for the goose is good for the gander” (Paragraph 30). Malcolm substituted different phrases for the “Ballot or the Bullet” but each phrase implied the possibility of violence in order to obtain equality.

The phrase the “Ballot or the Bullet” not only appears in confrontational sections, it also appears in managerial sections. Malcolm does this to keep the element of confrontation front and center. More importantly, to demonstrate the urgency of a peaceful resolution as the only way of avoiding violence. For instance, when Malcolm suggests bringing the USA before the United Nations for Human Rights violations, this is an example of how he wants to utilize the political system. Malcolm uses the phrase to demonstrate that the ballot could be stronger than the bullet especially before the U.N. With the use of the key phrase, Malcolm states “Let the world know how bloody [the white man] his hands are. Let the world know the hypocrisy that’s practiced over here. Let it be the ballot or the bullet. Let him know that it must be the ballot or the bullet” (Paragraph 34).

The next managerial situation where Malcolm uses the phrase is when he begins to explain his philosophy about Black Nationalism (Paragraph 42). Malcolm specifically equates a ballot with a bullet as it pertains to politics. Malcolm makes the argument that a ballot is just as powerful as a bullet if used properly. Malcolm says “The black man in the black community has to be re-educated into the science of politics so he will know what politics is supposed to bring him in return. Don’t be throwing out any ballots. A ballot is like a bullet. You don’t throw your ballots until you see a target, and if that target is not within your reach, keep your ballot in your pocket.”

Malcolm used a problem, cause, solution as a basic structure of his speech. By using this structure, Malcolm easily identified the problems faced by Black Americans, what and who were the cause of these problems, and the solutions needed to remedy those problems. Malcolm also alternated a managerial stance with a confrontational stance within the main structure of the speech, mainly to demonstrate his willingness to seek a peaceful resolution to the problems that beset the Black community. Second, Malcolm countered a managerial approach with a confrontational one also to demonstrate that if the government was unwilling to cooperate, all necessary action would be taken to achieve equal rights. Third, this method was used to shock and remind his audience that the threat of violence must always exist so as to give the political process an incentive to move faster. Malcolm did not want people to die, but it was important for him to show the lengths to which he and the Black community would be willing to go to achieve equal rights.

The confrontational theme remained in view throughout the speech because of the repeated use of the phrase the “Ballot or the Bullet.” Malcolm used the phrase and at the beginning or end of those solution sections that had confrontational aspects. Again, it was repeated to show that violence was a legitimate option. Less obviously however, Malcolm also used the phrase in some managerial sections of the speech to encourage the Black community to get more involved politically so that the government can work for them. By getting involved the likelihood of violence would decrease and the Black community would become more independent. Still, strong hints of confrontation remained within each managerial section.

Conclusion

To this day, Malcolm’s fame is greater than it ever was when he was alive. Moreover, today considerable money is made by marketing his image. Malcolm would probably not have been reassured by this belated recognition, largely because so much of it reflects white approval (Ling 1993, p. 14). Nevertheless, the voice and spirit of Malcolm have reached a new generation of people around the world. Yet, the precise impact of Malcolm’s legacy has yet to be determined because of the lack of analysis of his work, of his message, and the misconceptions about the man himself. Both Black conservatives and liberals find it chic to claim that Malcolm had a positive influence on their lives and embodies their beliefs and values. Even though, when he was alive, he was not considered to be a conservative or a liberal, rather a radical. Today, it can be argued that Malcolm represents a symbol of radical revolution, while for others, he is a symbol of the fight against racism and poverty. This reflects the complexity of his position revealed in this work.

History is now judging Malcolm differently, making him more socially acceptable. That judgment however is not a unified one. There is some agreement that he no longer has the image of a violent demagogue. To many, he simply represents the symbol of freedom. A broader social acceptance is due to the fact that different people accept different ideas and receive messages differently. This is why facets of his message are used by people ranging the political spectrum. Not only were his beliefs at any given time evolving, so was his approach to bringing about freedom, justice, and equality for Black Americans. This transformation is part of the complexity and the many faces which make up Malcolm. According to Charles Whitaker, “the trouble is that Malcolm X’s personal history, like his philosophy, defies easy categorization. Even scholars who knew him and have spent considerable time studying his life and speeches maintain that Malcolm is not readily accessible to them” (Whitaker 1992, p. 118).

Who Malcolm was and what he would have been today is still a matter of conjecture. Malcolm was a changing figure and was able to adapt his ideas and beliefs in response to the current and social situation. In the same article written by Whitaker, Vincent Harding stated that part of difficulty scholars and others face when attempting to pin down the essence of Malcolm is that he was felled at a critical moment in his personal and philosophical development. “Malcolm was a person who was still working out who he was at the time of his death,” Harding says. He was still looking for that next step and wrestling with this central question of how to empower the poor” (Whitaker 1992, p. 122).

This is why so many individuals within and outside the political system feel compelled to claim Malcolm as one of their own. Since Malcolm was an ardent proponent of self-determination, this has prompted Black conservatives such as Shelby Steele and Alan Keyes to suggest that if Malcom were alive, he would be in their camp (Boyd 1993, p. 26). It may also surprise many to learn that the US Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas has claimed to adhere to Malcolm X's political philosophies (Baker-Woods 1993, p. 46).

Malcolm's appeal among Black youth remains as strong today as it did fifty-five years ago, in large part because he speaks out against the injustices that African Americans encounter on a daily basis such as racial profiling and police brutality. To support Malcolm is a way for some to express their distrust of a system that has exploited African Americans for more than four centuries. Many scholars and other writers have really only begun to interrogate Malcom's life. Malcolm's legacy is difficult to determine, but we know his appeal has transcended race, class and, to some extent, political persuasion. His image has changed from an angry Black militant to a defender of human rights. People may take many different messages from his works. However, some things have stayed the same. Malcolm spoke out against racial discrimination of Blacks, fought to empower the poor, was a proponent of self-defense, and was an ardent supporter of self-determination. This, as much as anything else, is his legacy.

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