

The ballot or the bullet history essay



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Malcolm X was a revolutionary and a leader. He was a visionary of his time. On April 3, 1964 (Breitman, 1990) Malcolm X stood in front of a crowd to present The Ballot or The Bullet, one of the greatest speeches that has ever been uttered on American soil. In looking at this speech we will cover a brief history leading up to the event, the goals of Malcolm X in performing this speech, rhetoric strategies he used during the speech, and how effective the speech was, in order to deduce what made this speech on the greatest.

Malcolm X was a boy whom upon whom placed a destiny to rise from obscurity and become a pivotal figure in the civil rights movement. It seemed that every moment leading to " The Ballot or the Bullet" was tailoring him to that role, that speech, and that moment. Haberman (2007) gives an account of his past that tells of a poor little boy, born on May 19, 1925 in Omaha Nebraska, his name was Malcolm Little. He was born to a candid Baptist minister and civil rights activist, Earl Little. Malcolm lived a challenging life with his father being who he was. They were forced to move twice under threat of death by his 4th birthday due to countless death threats. In 1931, when Malcolm was only 6 years old, he had to face the fact that his father was found dead on a pair of trolley tracks.

Malcolm lived a rough childhood getting involved in many questionable activities. Until 1946 when Malcolm was arrested for burglary and sentenced to seven years in prison. There, Malcolm was transformed forever as he converted from his Baptists roots to the Muslim tradition. He then chose to remove the name Little, which we took to be a slaves name, and took upon himself the name X. After a 1964 pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, Malcolm began

spreading his ideas and gained the confidence need in order to return to the States and spreads his views of civil rights.

What he came back to was a forlorn black community that was waiting for the future to change in a positive way. In the past 20 years of the civil rights movement, the job market had actually gotten worse. According to Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), "[i]n 1948, the jobless rate of non-white males between the ages of fourteen and nineteen was 7.6 percent. In 1965, the percentage of unemployment in this group was 22.6 percent." This was only the cherry on top the sundae; the real problems lay much deeper than this. Allen (1970) tells of civil rights demonstrators who "let themselves be brutalized, beaten, jailed, and killed, following the admonitions of moralizing leaders who told them to 'love your enemy' and 'turn the other cheek.'" The hopes of a successful civil rights movement seemed to be all but diminishing. In the eyes of the people all this suffering, all this trouble, and all this pain had gotten them absolutely nothing. "The civil rights movement failed..." (Allen, 1970). The residents of Oakland California saw this clearly:

They could easily recognize that if the right to vote, to swim with whites, to travel in other than the back seats of buses, or to eat in public with whites had any true significance to black lives, that black Oakland would be far better off than it was (Major, 1971).

In order to push the civil rights movement into a conceivable leap into progression, in June 1963, President John F. Kennedy began pushing a civil rights bill through congress. After Kennedy's assassination the bill passed the House. As the bill sat in the hall of the Senate, waiting for a decisive

consensus between the representatives, 370 miles away, in Cleveland Ohio, Malcolm X stood up to the podium to deliver one of the greatest speeches in American history.

Malcolm's speech was more a call to action than anything. It was said for the purpose of persuading the black population of a few things: first, is black population is not part of this society because they in no are allowed to participate in it. " Everything that came out of Europe, every blue-eyed thing, is already an American. And as long as you and I have been over here, we aren't Americans yet." (8) Second, it is the Dixiecrat that is causing this mass discrimination and manipulation of the black society. Malcolm X makes the connection that the Democrats control the senate, " Democrats have got the government sewed up..." (13). Furthermore, " A vote for a Democrat is a vote for a Dixiecrat" (15). So it is the Dixiecrats that is controlling the government and is stopping the civil rights bill from passing in the senate. Next, it is the black society that is causing the Dixiecrats to be in power because it is their vote, or lack of vote, that allows them continued control of the government. Malcolm's final point is that the only way to change the government is through immediate action. " Let it be the ballot or the bullet" (37). These are the only two ways in which the black society has the power to change their situation for the better. It is either they go to the ballot and express their opinions by putting the appropriate officers in the appropriate offices or to take action through the bullet and change the mind of the electorate through violence. When Malcolm X says by the bullet he truly means by the bullet, for "[a]ny time you demonstrate against segregation and a man has the has the audacity to put a police dog on you, kill that dog,

kill him, I'm tell you, kill that dog" (31). These were the basic messages that Malcolm X was spreading through his speech.

In giving these ideas, as in any speech, there were certain rhetorical barriers that separated his message from full and completely being accepted by the audience. The first was a clear religious barrier that Malcolm X address in the first part of his speech. " I, [Malcolm X, am] still a Muslim; my religion is still Islam." (2) African American families have thus far been teaching their kids a doctrine of " traditional Christianity" (Glazier, 2001). In order to ensure that any presumptions that the audience my have on Malcom X due to his religion are put to rest, he states:

Although I'm still a Muslim, I'm not here tonight to discuss my religion. I'm not here to try and change your religion. 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 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. (3)

Beyond this first separation of religion is a further deeper separation of the ideology in which one chooses to respond to action. Through this " traditional Christian" upbringing that many African Americans received, there was an " emphasis on patience and redemptive suffering" (Glazier, 2001); this was in stark contrast to the proactive, often violent tendencies that Malcolm X purposed. Malcolm X believed that these traditional strategies were passé and that "[t]here [were] new strategies coming in. It'll be Molotov cocktails this month, hand grenades next month, and something else next moth. It'll

be ballots, or it'll be bullets. It'll be liberty, or it will be death." (25) This extremist view often is not the best magnet for individuals, but when the norms no longer seem to be working sometimes the radical is all that is left. Malcolm X observed " you will find young people more incensed over [racism, discrimination, and segregation] -- they feel more filled with an urge to eliminate it" (X, 1965) He took this and he channeled it into his speech hoping the polarizing view would actually play into his favor. Malcolm X, although having many rhetoric barriers, played off of them in a way that he was able to capture his audience effectively to the purpose of his speech.

Malcolm X used a plethora of rhetoric methods in order to ensure that his audience was sufficiently drawn in and mesmerized by the words and content of his speech. First, it is important to mention some of Malcolm very strategic use of logical progressions within the speech as a key factor of rhetoric strategy. The first that we come across is Malcolm defending his claim that himself and " 22 million black people who are victims of Americanism" (10) are not American. Malcolm begins by stating that he does not " consider himself and American" (8) because he does not receive the same rights as the white men. He makes his point through the rhetoric strategy of an analogy. Malcolm claims that he is " not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on [his] plate, and call [himself] a diner. Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on that plate" (9) Unless the African American society share in the same rights as white Americans then all African Americans cannot rightfully be called Americans. His most clear form of logical progression is through him proving that it is the lack of Black voters, and excess of white

oppression, that is causing the current filibuster in the Senate. First come the accusation that the Democrats are the reason for the filibuster because it is their ranks that have the majority, yet are not pushing the bill through (13). It is specifically the Dixiecrats who are the cause of this problem, but a "Dixiecrat is nothing but a Democrat in disguise" (15). It is the Dixiecrats who are the problem because

[t]he Dixiecrats in Washington, D. C., control the key committees that run the government. The only reason the Dixiecrats control these committees, is because they have seniority. The only reason they have seniority is because they come from states where Negroes can't vote. (16)

The clear conclusion is that the lack of the Negro vote is the cause for the excess of the Dixiecrats and the excess of the Dixiecrats is the cause for the filibuster. Malcolm X was able to use logical progression as a very effective tool to ensure that he was able to prove a concrete point through simple steps that everyone could follow.

Malcolm X's rational arguments shown through logical progression are just one of the many tools employed by this man. Another powerful tool is putting each person in the situations of their race, even though most of them, most likely, did not experience these first hand. Malcolm said that "[e]very time [America] had a call to arms, we were the first ones in uniform. We died on every battlefield the white man had. We have made a greater sacrifice than anybody who's standing up in America today" (28). This allowed every African American, no matter what religion or background, to relate and feel a sense of passion in the fact that each was part of this

discrimination. Another tool that is employed is that of personification. In order that Malcolm may make his point that the white America is evil, he personifies America through Uncle Sam saying that " Uncle Sam's hands are dripping with blood, dripping with the blood of the black man in this country" (36). The final form of rhetoric strategy that I will touch on is Malcolm X's use of a very effective simile. When talking about casting votes he instructs the audience that they should not " 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" (46). Through this simile he is remind his audience that each posses a very powerful tool and not one that should be take lightly. Each individual must ensure that they use the tool wisely and effectively if any outcome is to be achieved. Finally the most important rhetoric strategy is through Malcolm X's repetition of the phrase " the ballet or the bullet" (63). This is used to ensure the integration of the main concept of the speech into the minds of the listeners, giving the audience multiple occasions to grasp the point of his speech. Malcolm uses a vast array of varying rhetoric strategies in order to ensure his audience will follow and retain his speeches content and message.

How effective was the speech? In determining this it is important to first determine if Malcolm was able to over come the barriers that would stop him reaching his audience. Religion was one point in which he used to twist the point into his own favor. He downplayed the importance of religion say that regardless of " whether you're a Baptist, or a Methodist, or a Muslim" (3) there is a much bigger problem that needs to be dealt with first. Since we can overcome the differing opinion of religion, then it is hard to find a more

polarizing issue between groups that would hinder them from uniting. Thus Malcolm used this issue to show that no difference between each of them was too large to stop them from gathering together against this wrong being done to them and their people.

Whether or not this issue over came the difference of traditional Christian values versus Malcolm X's more radical values is a issue that over laps with whether or not this is a persuasive speech. According to Glazier (2001) in his book Encyclopedia of African and African-American Religions he states that "[t]he nationalist teachings of... Malcolm X had a profound impact on the younger, militant leaders of the civil rights movement." His speeches, especially this one, were able to reach a certain inner calling of the young. The young were sick of the traditional tactics as they saw them as ineffective. The need for a new and more direct path to success opened the way to Malcolm X. This ideology of a need for change and the persuasive techniques used by Malcolm X ensured that his speech was one that not only persuaded his audience that day but for many years to come, to take action for a cause worth fighting for.

Malcolm X had a talent for overcoming difference to reach his audience with a message; The ballot or the bullet was no exception. Even faced with difficult barriers such as religion and basic beliefs on proper means of expression, these were no matches for Malcolm X. He was able to clearly and cleverly ensure that these worked to his advantage, which in the end made his speech a very persuasive and effective one.

Malcolm X was a man who changed the world and a man who will be likely never forgotten. On April 3, 1964 Malcolm X stood in front of a crowd to present one of the greatest speeches that has ever told. This speech was destined for him to present because every moment in his life seemed to be walking him up, step by step, to that podium. His goals were simple, change the minds of his audience, that passive action was no longer a viable means to ensure results, rather a proactive, even violent, stance must be taken to guarantee victory. In order to get this message across Malcolm had clear barriers set before him. Through his clever rhetoric strategies he was able to develop a speech that not only drew his audience in, but held them captive as he fed them his views. All these points culminated into one of the most effective speeches ever given, which is what places The Ballot or The Bullet as one of the greatest speeches of all time.

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