

Malcolm x's legendary speech: "the ballot or the bullet"



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In his speech, The Ballot or the Bullet, Malcolm X challenges African Americans to practice black nationalism and become more active in their pursuit of equal rights by means of cooperation or violence.

Born May 19, 1925 Earl and Louise Little had given birth to a baby boy named Malcolm Little, the fourth child of eight, who would later go on to change his last name to X, to symbolize that his true African name had been lost. Malcolm looked highly of his father, ... a preacher who was also an active member of the local chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and avid supporter of black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey (Biography. com Editors). From his fathers involvement and status in the civil rights activism movements, Malcolm and his family suffered many attacks and threats from white supremacy groups including the Ku Klux Klan. Supremacists burned his home to flames as a child and killed his father, leaving his mother mentally scarred and unstable, which lead to her arrival in an insane asylum, separating her children into foster homes. At the tender age of 13, Malcolm was kicked out of school and sent to a juvenile detention home, later attending Mason Junior High School where he was elected class president by his predominantly white classmates (Biography. com Editors). As well as Malcolm did academically in school, it all came to a stop for him when his school teacher told a heart-wrenching comment that would stick with him forever, ...his aspirations of being a lawyer were ' no realistic goal for a nigger'... It made him feel that there was no place in the white world for a career-oriented black man, no matter how smart he was (Rodgers). Malcolm dropped out of school in the eighth grade at the age of 15.

Jobless, a young Malcolm turned to the criminal underworld, and got involved with drugs and theft, which in turn supported him with a lavish lifestyle, until he was caught at the age of 21 charged with larceny. While in prison, X educated himself by reading every book he could get his hands on, making him even more educated and intelligent than he had already proven to be. His newfound knowledge and frequent visits from siblings lead him to make the decision to convert to the Nation of Islam, like most of his brothers and siblings had already done. Malcolm had soon become a minister of a few temples, and preached to the followers of this religious movement that they had the power to fight off segregationist ideals and form their own independent black nation, with or without violence. Malcolm X repeatedly asserted that, there has never been a nonviolent revolution??| imploring Black people to take the fight beyond civil rights and expand it to human rights (Daniels). However, in 1964 Malcolm departed from the Nation of Islam for two main reasons, one being his mentors sins and the other on his response to a touchy subject for the American citizens. Malcolms mentor and friend Elijah Muhammad had been conducting affairs with the Nations secretaries, which went against the beliefs both Malcolm and Muhammad had preached for. Second, Malcolm had been angered by the actions of the Nation, so when asked about the assassination of Americas then president, John F. Kennedy, he spoke his truth with no regards for the reaction of the public. When specifically told not to comment on this subject Malcolm stated, ... the infamous ' Chickens coming home to roost' Saying America reaped what they sowed (McNeil). He furthermore stated murders of black civil rights activist and leaders implying that his assassination should be treated

not differently than these Black activists were mourned, leading to a public outcry from all over America.

Shortly after Malcolm's excommunication and departure from the Nation of Islam, he presented America with one of the most influential and distinguished speeches in the history of African American civil rights, 'The Ballot or the Bullet'. Malcolm delivered his notorious speech during the current election year between Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson and Republican Barry M. Goldwater. This was an influential moment in time for this speech to occur, because Malcolm wanted the Black people of America to know that they had a voice and the power to make equality a reality if they banded together to make a political change in the nation's system of government. ... his target was not to enrage white people in 'The Ballot or the Bullet', as it was a message of self-help and personal responsibility toward Black men and women (McNeil). In his speech, X covered a wide variety of topics concerning the Black community including: religion, politics, job creations, voting rights and most importantly, human rights. The main message was that African Americans had a choice to move forward with their future and how it can change, by choosing the Ballot, or the Bullet. The Ballot or the Bullet is a wordplay on the infamous phrase by Patrick Henry, Give me liberty, or give me death in which the Ballot represents America giving Black people equal voting rights and the Bullet representing the violence that would occur in the nation if equality was not granted.

In his speech, Malcolm X used a series of rhetorical devices to better express his opinions and views on the subject. Malcolm's tone throughout the speech was that of much anger and he criticizes American society. His tone reaches <https://assignbuster.com/malcolm-xs-legendary-speech-the-ballot-or-the-bullet/>

the audience in an inspirational way, as he progressively becomes more outraged and translates that through the audience. His goal of the speech was to expose all of the injustices America and its citizens had been committing toward African Americans. His diction was informal as he projects his speech in a way that would make the audience know he was apart of this injustice and so they would easily understand his mindset for those who were uneducated as well as educated. However, he also incorporates a formality into his speech, using strong vocabulary showing that he was a well-educated man, proving that he is perfectly capable of making a change for human rights. He was emotionally charged and his persuasive language and rhetoric made it compelling for the audience to evoke feelings on the subject of civil rights. Rhetorical questions are said a numerous amount of times to emphasize his point and make the audience question and think about the illogical approaches the government has made progressively for carrying out the Black communities rights. For example, The question tonight, as I understand it, is ' The Negro Revolt, and Where Do We Go From here?' or What Next?' (Malcolm X, The Ballot or the Bullet). While Malcolm uses a series of devices in his speech, the most evident was his use of repetition of the speeches title, The Ballot or the Bullet. He repeatedly quotes this significant phrase, because it stays within the audience's mind and draws their attention to the focus of the speech time after time. Another important strategy used, was his use of ethos to strategically convince his audience to to agree and understand where he was coming from. His use of ethos can be found in many instances but when he first began his speech he stated this, We all have the same problem. They don't hang you because you're a Baptist; They don't attack me because I'm a Muslim; they attack me

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cause im black. They attack all of us for the same reason (Malcolm X, The Ballot or the Bullet). Ethos is shown through that specific quote, because he was relating himself to the people he was standing up for, creating a sense of credibility.

On February 21, 1965, almost a year after his monumental speech, Malcolm X was shot down and assassinated by members of The Nation of Islam while he was speaking at a rally in New York City. While Malcolm was alive, many people, outside of his supporters, viewed him as a babble- mouth who preached for violence, but after his death, America started to view his ideologies in a different perspective. The publication of his autobiography skyrocketed and movements were created in honor of his legacy. Malcolm X's speech is classified as a great American speech because of the way he connected to his audience, expressed his radical ideals, empowered a change in the government, and showed the Black community that they are capable of creating a new future for themselves by any means big or small. His impact on American society and his legacy will forever stay current, to inspire our nation at the lowest times, Because power, real power, comes from our conviction which produces action, uncompromising action"" (Biography. com Editors).