

A question of appeal: rhetorical analysis of malcolm x and mlk



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As outspoken leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. urged black Americans to pursue equality with uncompromising dignity; however, each held a distinct opinion about the proper methods and the purpose of such action. In his impassioned speech, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” X directly addresses the listener, advocating for the “reciprocation” of violence in the name of equality and self-respect.

Decrying the American government, he makes clear his emphatic stance against the brutality of the white establishment. Conversely, in King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” he exalts the instances of civil disobedience carried out by nonviolent protestors, maintaining that when preexisting tension is brought to light, the resulting outcry will lead to widespread change. King’s letter employs a persistent appeal to mainstream Christian, American values, a strict adherence to nonviolence, and a readiness to work within established systems. This consideration of deep-seated social mores widens the accessibility of his arguments and thus makes his rhetorical stance more effective than X’s more revolutionary ideology.

X’s speech seeks to empathize with politically disillusioned African Americans and offer the black nationalist perspective as a solution to their discontent. “All of us have suffered here, in this country” he proclaims, citing “political oppression..., economic exploitation..., and social degradation at the hands of the white man.” Then, alluding to the upcoming election cycle, he further decries the “white political crooks [who] will be right back in your and my community,” whose “treachery” and “false promises” have frustrated black citizens, creating a cynical minority population which “just doesn’t intend to turn the other cheek any longer.”

This is the outset of X's speech, and he phrases it deliberately, creating an us-vs-them narrative and being sure to align himself with the "us"—the audience, members of "your and my community." He lets the listener know that he shares his disdain of the racist national establishment:

"No, I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism...So, I'm not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver—no, not I. I'm speaking as a victim of this American system...I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare."

X absolutely denounces any respect for the idealized vision of America, and he channels this contempt into an urge to take a stand. "These 22 million victims are waking up..." he says, "We want freedom now, but we're not going to get it saying 'We Shall Overcome.' We've got to fight until we overcome." The fight referenced here is, to X, quite literally a battle for freedom.

X's speech is punctuated with repetition of the phrase, "the ballot or the bullet," reinforcing the idea that when denied basic human rights, a person is entitled, if not obligated, to physically defend himself and reciprocate the violence of others. When kept voiceless and unrepresented in government, he must protect his freedoms in other ways. "If it's necessary to form a black nationalist army, we'll form a black nationalist army. It'll be the ballot or the bullet. It'll be liberty or it'll be death." He is arguing that the systems already in place are not conducive to the attainment of freedom for black

people. If real, tangible change is to occur, it must be through force because America's "so-called democracy" certainly will not allow it.

Seeking the support of his audience, X paints this pointedly radical, dissident stance as mainstream:

"The political philosophy of black nationalism is being taught in the Christian church...in the NAACP...in CORE meetings...in SNCC meetings...in Muslim meetings...where nothing but atheists and agnostics come together. It's being taught everywhere."

He not only aligns his views with what is most popular, but also extends his persuasive effort beyond what is traditionally American, contrasting his viewpoint with the markedly biblical rationale of Martin Luther King.

Dr. King cannot be called a conservative thinker; he sees the injustices in America and implores his audience to take action. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," he proclaims, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." He recognizes the plight of black Americans and empathizes with their desire to make a change. "When you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments," he remarks, "then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait." Clearly, he does not try to downplay the significance of the crime of segregation or the moral imperative of protests. However, he acknowledges that the solution to this institutional problem

must itself take place within the systems of power that control American policy.

King has faith that the American people are capable of exacting change when confronted with the blatant truth of systematic oppression, and that swaying the “ national opinion” can be a dramatic accomplishment.

Distancing his movement from any intentional acts of violence, he explains, “ Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with.” His goal is not immediate retribution but a chance to constructively interact with the American institutions that perpetuate racial discrimination. “ Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue,” he writes, implying that positive change will come if the issue is brought to the attention of the American public. This optimism is a result of a firmly-held belief in the progressive strength of American democratic values, which he encourages his audience to embrace, stating, “ Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.” Success will not come through a violent upheaval, but through a coordinated movement within America’s existing channels for change. A reform of the system must occur within the means of the system, King argues, making his stance seem more pragmatic than that of Malcolm X.

Beyond acknowledging the staying power of governmental structures, King uses the widespread influence of American traditions to his rhetorical advantage, constantly aligning his viewpoints with important historical figures and ideals. His justification for civil disobedience leans heavily on elements of Christianity and cites St. Augustine's statement that "an unjust law is no law at all." Connecting this religious perspective to the more secular and patriotic, he states:

"Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience...It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks...To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience."

These stories assure the reader that King's movement is on the right side of history. By placing civil rights activists alongside philosophers and revolutionaries, he builds enthusiasm and borrows credibility. Finally, to conclude his letter, he asserts:

"One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence."

This impactful summation brings together the powerful ideas King uses to support his viewpoint. His love for America as a nation is evidenced by the mention of its most sacred core values, founding principles, and spiritual heritage, and this pro-American perspective makes it easier for those who are not quite so cynical about the nation's future to receive King's argument.

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, with justice and righteousness in mind, called upon Americans to transform their racially divided nation. Each knew the burden faced by black Americans in the era of illegal segregation and made clear their intentions to overcome these hardships. King's perspective, no more apologetic or tolerant of racism, aligned with the more pervasive social establishments of the time and was thus more capable of attracting a wider base of support, and the American Civil Rights Movement is now very strongly associated with his philosophy of nonviolent protest.