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An Interview with Malcolm X

Directions: The imaginary interview that follows will expose you to some of the thoughts of Malcolm X. All selections are from his speech “The Ballot or the Bullet” (1964) and from his later reflection the night his house was bombed a week before his assassination. As you read, take notes to summarize Malcolm X’s ideas. Then answer the questions at the end of the interview.

Interviewer: Are you anti white?
Malcolm: . . . We’re [not] anti-white, but . . . we’re anti-exploitation, we’re anti-degradation, we’re anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn’t want us to be anti-him, let him stop oppressing and exploiting and degrading us.

Whether we are Christians or Muslims or nationalists or agnostics or atheists, we must first learn to forget our differences. . . .

I am one who doesn’t believe in deluding myself. I’m not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn’t make you a diner, unless you eat some of what’s on that plate. . . . Being born here in America doesn’t make you an American. Why, if birth made you American, you wouldn’t need any legislation, you wouldn’t need any amendments to the Constitution, you wouldn’t be faced with civil-rights filibustering in Washington, D.C., right now. They don’t have to pass civil-rights legislation to make a Polack an American.

No, I’m not an American. I’m one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the 22 million black people who are the victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So, I’m not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot. . . . I’m speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don’t see any American dream; I see an American nightmare.

Interviewer: The way you speak has led some to think you are seeking the overthrow of the government. Are you?

Malcolm: I say again, I’m not anti-Democrat, I’m not anti-Republican. . . . I’m just questioning their sincerity, and some of the strategy that they’ve been using on our people by promising them promises that they don’t intend to keep. . . . [I]t’s time now for you and me to become more politically mature and realize what the ballot is for; what we’re supposed to get when we cast a ballot; and that if we don’t cast a ballot, it’s going to end up in a situation where we’re going to have to cast a bullet. . . . In the North, they do it a different way. They have a system that’s known as gerrymandering. . . . It means when Negroes become too heavily concentrated in a certain area, and begin to gain too much political power, the white man comes along and changes the district lines. You may say, “Why do you keep saying white man?” Because it’s the white man who does it. I haven’t ever seen

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any Negro changing any lines. They don't let him get near the line. . . . And usually, it's the white man who grins at you the most, and pats you on the back, and is supposed to be your friend. He may be friendly, but he's not your friend.

Interviewer:

How do you see yourself in terms of the civil rights movement?

Malcolm:

We need some new allies. The entire civil-rights struggle needs a new interpretation, a broader interpretation. . . . To those of us whose philosophy is black nationalism, the only way you can get involved in the civil-rights struggle is give it a new interpretation. . . . Well, we're justified in seeking civil rights, if it means equality of opportunity, because all we're doing there is trying to collect for our investment. Our mothers and fathers invested sweat and blood. Three hundred and ten years we worked in this country without a dime in return. . . . You let the white man walk around here talking about how rich this country is, but you never stop to think how it got rich so quick. It got rich because you made it rich. . . .

Not only did we give of our free labor, we gave of our blood. Every time he had a call to arms, we were the first ones in uniform. . . . We have made a greater sacrifice than anybody who's standing up in America today. We have made a greater contribution and have collected less. Civil rights, for those of us whose philosophy is black nationalism, means: "Give it to us now."

Interviewer:

But are you advocating violence?

Malcolm:

Any time you demonstrate against segregation and a man has the audacity to put a police dog on you, kill that dog, kill him. . . . Then you'll put a stop to it.

I don't mean go out and get violent; but at the same time you should never be nonviolent unless you run into some nonviolence. I'm nonviolent with those who are nonviolent with me. . . . 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.

Interviewer:

What about the successes of the nonviolent marches throughout the South?

Malcolm:

Uncle Sam's hands are dripping with blood, dripping with the blood of the black man in this country. He's the earth's number-one hypocrite. . . . Expand the civil-rights struggle to the level of human rights, take it into the United Nations, where our African brothers can throw their weight on our side, where our Asian brothers can throw their weight on our side, where our Latin-American brothers can throw their weight on our side, and where 800 million Chinamen are sitting there waiting to throw their weight on our side.

Interviewer: Can you explain what you mean by black nationalism?

Malcolm: The political philosophy of black nationalism means that the black man should control the politics and the politicians in his own community; no more. 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. . . . The political philosophy of black nationalism is being taught in the Christian church. It's being taught in the NAACP. It's being taught in CORE meetings. It's being taught in SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] meetings. It's being taught in Muslim meetings. It's being taught where nothing but atheists and agnostics come together. . . . Black people are fed up with the dillydallying, pussyfooting, compromising approach that we've been using toward getting our freedom. 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 economic philosophy of black nationalism is pure and simple. It only means that we should control the economy of our community. Why should white people be running all the stores in our community? Why should white people be running the banks of our community? . . . If we own the stores, if we operate the businesses, if we try and establish some industry in our own community, then we're developing to the position where we are creating employment for our own kind. Once you gain control of the economy of your own community, then you don't have to picket and boycott and beg some cracker downtown for a job in his business. The social philosophy of black nationalism only means that we have to get together and remove the evils, the vices, alcoholism, drug addiction, and other evils that are destroying the moral fiber of our community. We ourselves have to lift the level of our community, the standard of our community to a higher level, make our own society beautiful so that we will be satisfied in our own social circles and won't be running around here trying to knock our way into a social circle where we're not wanted. . . . A gospel such as black nationalism . . . [is designed] to make the black man re-evaluate himself. . . . We've got to change our own minds about each other. . . . We have to see each other with new eyes. . . . We have to come together with warmth so we can develop unity and harmony that's necessary to get this problem solved ourselves.

Interviewer: Are you willing to work with Martin Luther King and the NAACP?

Malcolm: We will work with anybody, anywhere, at any time, who is genuinely interested in tackling the problem head-on, nonviolently as long as the enemy is nonviolent, but violent when the enemy gets violent. We'll work with you on the voter-registration drive, we'll work with you on rent strikes, we'll work with you on school boycotts. . . .

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Last but not least, I must say this concerning the great controversy over rifles and shotguns If the white man doesn't want the black man buying rifles and shotguns, then let the government do its job!

Interviewer: Can you explain what changes developed in your perspective after your Haj?

Malcolm: When I got over there and went to Mecca and saw these people who were blond and blue-eyed and pale-skinned . . . , I said, "Well," but I watched them closely. And I noticed that though they were white, and they would call themselves white, there was a difference between them and the white ones over here. And that basic difference was this: In Asia or the Arab world or in Africa, where the Muslims are, if you find one who says he's white, all he's doing is using an adjective to describe something that's incidental about him, one of his incidental characteristics; so there's nothing else to it, he's just white.

But when you get the white man over here in America and he says he's white, he means something else. You can listen to the sound of his voice—when he says he's white, he means he's boss. That's right. That's what white means in this language. . . . White means free, boss. He's up there. So that when he says he's white he has a little different sound in his voice.

Interviewer: But your experience of differences abroad has not led you to abandon violence as a tool?

Malcolm: I saw in the paper where they—on the television where they took this Black woman down in Selma, Alabama, and knocked her right down on the ground, dragging her down the street. . . . And Negro men standing around doing nothing about it saying, "Well, let's overcome them with our capacity to love." What kind of phrase is that? "Overcome them with our capacity to love." And then it disgraces the rest of us, because all over the world the picture is splashed showing a Black woman with some white brutes, with their knees on her holding her down, and full-grown Black men standing around watching it. . . .

Interviewer: So what is the major difference now in how you understand the problem of rights for blacks?

we're justified in imitating by any means necessary.
only mean vigorous action in self-defense, and that vigorous action we feel know that if they don't stop that Klan, we'll stop it ourselves. . . . So, we about it but talk, it is a duty, it's your and my duty as men, as human beings, it is our duty to our people, to organize ourselves and let the government [S]ince the federal government has shown that it isn't going to do anything

Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 23–44 passim. Copyright © 1965, 1989 by Betty Shabazz and Pathfinder Press. Reprinted by permission.

Malcolm: [O]nce we became identified with the orthodox Muslim world, we also formed a group known as the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which is designed to fight all the negative political, economic, and social conditions that exist in our neighborhood. It's a nonreligious organization to which anyone can belong who's interested in direct action. And one of our first programs is to take our problem out of the civil rights context and place it at the international level, of human rights, so that the entire world can have a voice in our struggle.

Interviewer: Last year you said you would work with the other civil rights groups. Is that still your position?

Malcolm: [W]e will work with all others, even civil rights groups, who are dedicated to increase the number of Black registered voters in the South. . . . So we will join in with them in their voter registration and help to train brothers in the arts that are necessary in this day and age to enable one to continue his existence upon this earth. I say again that I'm not a racist, I don't believe in any form of segregation or anything like that. I'm for brotherhood for everybody, but I don't believe in forcing brotherhood upon people who don't want it. Let us practice brotherhood among ourselves, and then others who want to practice brotherhood with us, we practice it with them also, we're for that. But I don't think that we should run around trying to love somebody who doesn't love us.²

1. Evaluate Malcolm X's claims not to be anti-white. Why do you think so many rejected his analysis?
2. Analyze Malcolm X's critique of the civil rights movement. Be sure to read both speeches before you do so.
3. When did he see the use of violence as justifiable?
4. What economic and political changes did he advocate for the black community?

²Malcolm X, "Educate Our People in the Science of Politics," in *February 1965: The Final Speeches*, ed. Steve Clark (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1992), 75-105 passim. Copyright © 1992 by Betty Shabazz and Pathfinder Press. Reprinted by permission.