**[BlackStudies.net](http://blackstudies.net/): MALCOLM X vs. MARTIN LUTHER KING**

*By Dr. Arthur Lewin*

Everything has its opposite. Black has white. Night has day. Hard, soft. Hot, cold. If there was a Martin Luther King Jr., there had to be a Malcolm X. Martin Luther King, history remembers. Malcolm X, history tries to forget. But each man in his own way dominated the times in which he lived. . .

Malcolm’s earliest memory is that of waking in the middle of the night in a burning house. His mother and father fought to get the children out as the blazing walls came crashing down. They coughed and stumbled their way out into the night as his father fired at the fleeing men on horseback dressed in white.

Martin Luther King, Sr. was a prominent minister in Atlanta, Georgia. The family lived in the middle class Black section of the largest city in the South. Everyone here was a professional: a doctor, a lawyer or a teacher, or they owned their own business. Martin attended the local Black high school graduating at the age of 15. He entered Morehouse College, also in Atlanta, finishing at 19 at the very top of his class. . .

Malcolm’s father, a farmer in rural Michigan, was a follower of Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. From its base in Harlem, in the 1920s, Marcus Garvey and the UNIA set up chapters in Black communities around the world. He taught that “Black is Beautiful,” and that Africans throughout the Diaspora must return (repatriate) to the Motherland. Malcolm as a boy attended meetings of the local UNIA chapter with his father who was a prominent member. However, a few years after his house was destroyed, Malcolm’s father was killed by a white mob. . .

Martin decided to follow in his father’s footsteps and become a minister. In 1955, at age 25, he became a Doctor of Divinity and received his first pastorship. It was in Montgomery, the capital of Alabama. At that time, throughout the South and much of the North, whites and Blacks, by law, attended different public schools and used different public facilities. The Black schools and facilities were inferior, and Blacks were denied the right to vote. On the buses they rode in back, the whites in front, and if the white half was filled, the Blacks had to surrender their seats. One day, though, one of Montgomery’s citizens, Mrs. Rosa Parks, decided to fight back. . .

Though Malcolm’s mother tried desperately to keep the family together, she found that she could not. She eventually had a mental breakdown, was institutionalized and the children were split up and sent to foster care. Malcolm, nonetheless, became the best pupil in the all-white eighth grade class he attended. However, when he told a teacher that he’d like to be a lawyer, the man called him a racial epithet and told him to learn to do something with his hands. After dropping out of school, Malcolm became deeply involved in street life, was arrested, convicted and sent to jail for a long time. . .

On December 3, 1955 Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat on the bus to a white passenger and was arrested. In response, the Black community of Montgomery organized a boycott of the buses, and Martin Luther King, being newly arrived, and therefore not suspected of being under the influence of local white interests, was selected as the chair of their meetings. After a 13 month struggle, the boycott was successful and the buses of Montgomery were integrated. In the following years, Martin Luther King emerged as the head of a movement for justice and equality that branched out from Montgomery and swept through the South. . .

While in jail, Malcolm became a follower of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam in America, in many ways the successor to Marcus Garvey’s UNIA. Malcolm became the Nation’s most effective and charismatic leader establishing chapters throughout the country and swelling membership by leaps and bounds. He and the Nation advocated self-defense and the total economic and political independence of Black America. They emerged as a counterpoint to the movement for inclusion advocated by King and his followers. . .

Thus Malcolm and King each became a focus of one of the opposing wings of the movement for equality that swept Black America, and the country, in the middle of the last century. The titanic struggle shook the nation and the world, and its reverberations are still felt today. As for King and Malcolm, born three years apart, they would also depart three years apart, each assassinated in the struggle at age 39. (Malcolm in New York in 1965. King in Memphis in 1968.)

At times those in power were eager to deal with King for fear of having to contend with Malcolm and the forces he represented. However, though initially favored by the American government, once King opposed the War in Viet Nam, the government stopped protecting him. Also towards the end, King pressed beyond social equality and sought economic parity. And he would not desist, even when some of his followers struck back at those who struck them. And as for Malcolm, it’s said that towards the end, he too seemed to change some of his views.

Throughout our sojourn in America, we’ve always had two faces, two demeanors, as represented by King and Malcolm. Ultimately, though, each was seen as a threat by the American establishment. In truth, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Minister Malcolm X were not that different. They were fellow travelers on the same road, the one headed toward fulfillment of the Dream America holds for all that she’s the “Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave.”

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# Malcolm and Martin, closer than we ever thought

By **John Blake**, CNN May 19, 2010 11:36 a.m. EDT



**(CNN)** -- The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was leaving a news conference one afternoon when a tall man with a coppery complexion stepped out of the crowd and blocked his path.

Malcolm X, the African-American Muslim leader who once called King "Rev. Dr. Chicken-wing," extended his hand and smiled.

"Well, Malcolm, good to see you," King said after taking Malcolm X's hand.

"Good to see you," Malcolm X replied as both men broke into huge grins while a gaggle of photographers snapped pictures of their only meeting.

That encounter on March 26, 1964, lasted only a minute. But a photo of that meeting has tantalized scholars and supporters of both men for more than 45 years.

As the 85th birthday of [Malcolm X](http://www.cnn.com/topics/malcolm_x) is marked on Wednesday, history has freeze-framed him as the angry black separatist who saw whites as blue-eyed devils.

Yet near the end of his life, Malcolm X was becoming more like King -- and King was becoming more like him.

"In the last years of their lives, they were starting to move toward one another," says David Howard-Pitney, who recounted the Capitol Hill meeting in his book "Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s."

"While Malcolm is moderating from his earlier position, King is becoming more militant," Pitney says.

Malcolm X was reaching out to King even before he broke away from the Nation of Islam and embraced Sunni Islam after a pilgrimage to Mecca, says Andrew Young, a member of King's inner circle at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the [civil rights](http://www.cnn.com/topics/Civil_Rights) group King headed.

[Read more about the faith angles on the news at the CNN Belief Blog](http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/)

"Even before his trip to Mecca, Malcolm used to come by the SCLC's office," Young says. "Unfortunately, Dr. [King](http://www.cnn.com/topics/martin_luther_king_jr) was never there when he came."

**How Malcolm became a 'cultural revolutionary'**

Though the men met only once, they had been portrayed as foes in the minds of the American public for years.

Malcolm X burst onto the national scene in 1959 when he and the Nation of Islam were featured in a documentary, "The Hate That Hate Produced."

He became the Nation of Islam's most visible spokesman from his base in New York. While King preached about his dream, Malcolm X said blacks were trapped in a nightmare.

"It was his critique of America from the bottom up that was so shocking," says Young. "He was a young man with a Ph.D mind, but he was put out of school. He educated himself in jail by reading the dictionary."

Malcolm X's harsh rhetoric helped "decolonize" black people's minds by teaching them to be proud of their African heritage, says James Cone, author of "Martin & Malcolm & America."

"King was a political revolutionary. Malcolm was a cultural revolutionary," Cone says. "Malcolm changed how black people thought about themselves. Before Malcolm came along, we were all Negroes. After Malcolm, he helped us become black."

Despite their differences, both King and Malcolm X's political activism flowed from the same source, says Pitney, the civil rights scholar.

"They were fundamentally spiritual men," Pitney says. "While we remember them for their social and political activism, they were religious and spiritual at their core."

**Malcolm moves toward Martin**

Malcolm X, though, wanted to be more than a cultural revolutionary. He broke with the Nation of Islam in March 1964 and announced plans to start a black political organization.

He reached out to King and other civil rights leaders. In 1965, Malcolm X traveled to Selma, Alabama, where King was leading a campaign, to offer support.

"Brother Malcolm was definitely making an outreach to some civil rights leaders," says A. Peter Bailey, an original member of the group Malcolm X founded, The Organization of Afro-American Unity, and a friend of Malcolm X. "He believed that the one who would be most responsive would be Dr. King."

The Muslim leader had developed an appreciation for King, Bailey says.

"He had come to believe that King believed in what he was doing," Bailey says. "He believed in nonviolence; it just wasn't a show. He developed respect for him. I heard him say you have to give respect to men who put their lives on the line."

Malcolm X may have been willing to join the civil rights cause. But he never subscribed to nonviolence or abandoned his Muslim faith, Bailey says.

"The whole idea that he had become a token integrationist at the end of his life -- that's a bunch of jive," Bailey says.

**Martin moves toward Malcolm**

King's movement toward Malcolm began as he shifted the civil rights movement to the North, friends and scholars say.

During the last three years of his life, King became more radical. He talked about eliminating poverty and providing a guaranteed annual income for all U.S. citizens. He came out against the Vietnam War, and said American society would have to be restructured.

He also veered into Malcolm X's rhetorical territory when he started preaching black self-pride, says Pitney.

"King is photographed a number of times in 1967 and '68 wearing a 'Black is Beautiful' button,' " Pitney says.

A year before King died, the journalist David Halberstam even told him he "sounded like a nonviolent Malcolm X," Pitney says.

In the epic PBS civil rights series, Coretta Scott King, the civil rights leader's widow, said King never took Malcolm X's biting criticisms of his nonviolence stance personally.

"I know Martin had the greatest respect for Malcolm ...," she said. "I think that if Malcolm had lived, at some point the two would have come closer together and would have been a very strong force."

Young, King's close aide, says King had become more militant near the end of his life.

"It was more radical to deal with poverty than to deal with segregation so, in that sense, it's true," Young says. "But Dr. King never wavered in his commitment to nonviolence. In fact, he was getting stronger in his commitment to nonviolence. It was a more militant nonviolence."

**Why they endure**

Malcolm X and King never had the chance, though, to explore an alliance.

Malcolm X was assassinated in Harlem in 1965. King was murdered three years later.

Both were 39 at the time of their death. Both had been abandoned by former supporters. And both left virtually no money to their wives and young children because they refused to profit from their activism.

The photo of their meeting endures. It was taken because both men happened to be in the Capitol building that day to listen to politicians debate the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which would later pass.

Author Cone says the picture endures because both men embody the " 'yin and yang' deep in the soul of black America."

Even as King was changing America, he also realized that Malcolm X was changing him.

Cone says with a chuckle: "Martin Luther King once said that when he listened to Malcolm speak, even he got angry."