

Comparing Martin Luther

King Jr. and Malcolm X

Background information on Malcolm X:

Malcolm X was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1925, the fourth of eight children, whose birth name was Malcolm Little. When he was six years old, his father was murdered by a group of white men because of his involvement in a group called the Universal Negro Improvement Association, or UNIA. The UNIA was founded by Marcus Garvey and preached a philosophy of "black separatism" and black pride. Its goal was to get millions of African Americans to return to Africa because, as Garvey stated, blacks could never be treated justly in a country ruled by whites.

His father's death destroyed Malcolm's home life. His mother went insane and all of the children were placed into different foster homes. Malcolm was a very bright student, but he was an angry and bitter child. As he grew older, he lost interest in school. At age 15, he left school and went to live with an older half-sister in Boston. For the next several years Malcolm lived the life of a street hustler, making money illegally and in 1945 was sent to jail for a series of burglaries. He was sentenced to seven years in prison all before his 21st birthday.

While in prison, Malcolm learned that two of his brothers had joined a religious group called the Nation of Islam. The members of this group were called "Black Muslims." They led by a man named Elijah Muhammad, and they preached a philosophy similar to Marcus Garvey and the UNIA. They favored a path of racial separation for black Americans. The group viewed white Americans with suspicion, if not outright hatred and had no interest in integration with white society. The Black Muslims operated their own stores, farms and restaurants and they also preached a strict code of member behavior. Eating pork and using alcohol, tobacco and drugs was prohibited. When he was released from prison in 1952, Malcolm moved to Detroit to join the Nation of Islam. As other Black Muslims had done, Malcolm changed his last name. Black Muslims considered their family names to be part of their slave past, so they rejected them in favor of the suffix "X." Malcolm Little was reborn as Malcolm X.

Malcolm X rose quickly within the Black Muslim movement. By 1954, he was named minister of a temple in Harlem, NY. Before long, he was the Nation of Islam's most well-known spokesperson. By the early 1960s, Malcolm X spoke out against white racism and called for "any means necessary" to retaliate against that racism – including violence. At the same time, he publicly criticized any African American who favored cooperating with the "white establishment" in America, including those who were seeking to integrate blacks into all segments of white society.

By 1964, Malcolm X had become the most famous Black Muslim in America. He continued to push his radical civil rights views, which had begun to catch on in urban black ghettos across the country. Malcolm's popularity cause some resentment within the Nation of Islam, and a rift (division) developed between him and Elijah Muhammad. As a result, Malcolm X left the group in 1964. However, he stated he would remain a Muslim and continue to preach his separatist racial views.

In 1964, Malcolm X made a pilgrimage to the Middle East. In Mecca, the spiritual home of Islam, he was impressed by the harmony he saw among the various racial groups who visited there. Because of this experience, Malcolm X began to modify his feelings about cooperating with white people. Late in 1964 he stated "we will work with anyone, any group, no matter what their color is, as long as they are genuinely interested in talking the types of steps necessary to bring an end to the injustices that black people in this country are afflicted by."

By early 1965, Malcolm had become extremely unpopular with a segment of the Nation of Islam. He received death threats. His house was burned down. Finally, on February 21, 1965, he was assassinated by three men, two of whom were Nation of Islam members. All three men were convicted of murder and sentenced to prison. The question of who, if anyone, had ordered Malcolm's assassination remained unanswered.

Background Information on Martin Luther King Jr.:

Martin Luther King Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1929 as a son and grandson of Baptist preachers. Christianity placed an important role in Martin's life. From an early age, the family expected Martin to follow his father and grandfather by becoming a preacher. After he attended college, Martin enrolled at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania to study for the ministry.

While at Crozer, King became familiar with the philosophy and teachings of Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi had led India's struggle for independence from British rule. Throughout his crusade, Gandhi's message of love and nonviolent resistance helped bring independence for India through peaceful acts of civil disobedience, not violent rebellion. In Gandhi's philosophy, King felt that he had found the key to helping his own people overcome the racial injustices he saw in the U.S. As a young boy growing up in the South during the 1930s and 1940s, King witnessed racial prejudice first-hand. By 1951 he became committed to fighting for civil rights for all African Americans.

In 1953, he and his new wife, Coretta Scott, moved to Montgomery, AL where King became a pastor of a black Baptist Church. In December of 1955, King helped lead the Montgomery bus boycott following Rosa Parks arrest. During the boycott, blacks refused to ride the buses until the law was changed. As the leader of the movement, King was arrested and thrown in jail, and his house was bombed. Throughout the year-long boycott, he continued to urge his followers not to respond with violence. Ultimately, the Supreme Court ruled that the Montgomery law—as well as all of Alabama's state laws on segregated busing—was unconstitutional, and ordered the city to integrate the buses. King and his supporters had won an enormous civil rights victory.

In 1957, King and other black clergymen formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The group's aim was to spread and coordinate nonviolent civil rights protests across the South. By 1963, the movement for civil rights had become very powerful. Thousands of African Americans—and many sympathetic white people as well—had participated in sit-ins, marches and other demonstrations demanding an end to segregation. However, King was disappointed in the lack of federal government support in the civil rights effort. He became convinced that a massive action was necessary and called for a "March on Washington." On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people attended a rally in the nation's capital to show their support for civil rights. At the rally, King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech—his dream was that blacks and whites could live together in peace, and that African Americans would be able to fully participate in all aspects of American society without fear or prejudice.

For the next five years, King was the unquestioned leader of the civil rights movement in the United States. In 1964, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work. His activities brought about major changes in federal law, including passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yet for many African Americans who were still facing prejudice in their daily lives, progress was too slow. Some African American leaders complained that King's insistence on nonviolent protest, when protesters were often beaten and even killed, sent the wrong message to a mostly white America. Still, through all this criticism, King never changed his views. He maintained that the best—and the only—way to effect change was by peaceful means.

In 1968, King was in Memphis, TN supporting a strike by black garbage workers. On April 4, King was shot as he stood on his hotel balcony. He died a short time later at a local hospital. Many people believed that his killer, a man name James Earl Ray, was hired by other people who wanted to see King dead. That theory was never proven, and Ray was sent to prison for life. Like his hero, Gandhi, this man of nonviolence was struck down in the most violent of ways. And, just as with Gandhi, millions of people around the world mourned the death of Martin Luther King Jr.