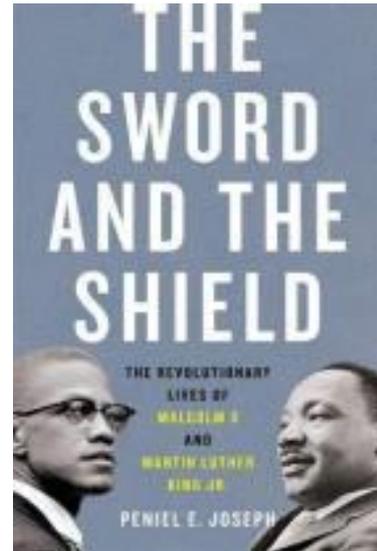


The Sword and the Shield

The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

Peniel E. Joseph



Recommendation

In the spring of 1964, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. attended the Senate debates on the US Civil Rights Act, which President Lyndon Johnson was pushing forward as a tribute to the late John F. Kennedy. King, already a celebrity, was about to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Malcolm X, a representative of the Nation of Islam, was a far more controversial figure who rejected nonviolence. But, as Peniel E. Joseph shows, by 1964 both men were changing. Malcolm X sought to influence and change democratic institutions. King understood that racism and poverty were a threat to the entire world. They both left a legacy that still shapes discussions of racism and injustice.

Take-Aways

- Malcolm X (Malcolm Little) was the child of followers of Marcus Garvey, and he grew up with a sense of “Black pride.”
- Martin Luther King, Jr. was the son of a prominent Black minister who vested in deep moral principles.
- By the late 1950s, Malcolm X, then a follower of the Nation of Islam, explored the fight against racism in a broad, international context.
- In 1963, King turned Birmingham, Alabama into the “centre of the world.”
- People widely misunderstand King’s seminal “I Have a Dream” speech.
- In 1964, Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam and committed himself to the struggle for civil rights.
- After Malcolm X’s assassination, King’s politics became more radical.
- In 1967, King transformed from a civil rights leader into a “political revolutionary.”
- Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X continue to influence movements seeking justice and liberation worldwide.

Summary

Malcolm X (Malcolm Little) was the child of followers of Marcus Garvey, and he grew up with a sense of “Black pride.”

Born in 1925, and named Malcolm Little, Malcolm X grew up in a family that revered the work of civil rights pioneer Marcus Garvey and affirmed the idea of “Black pride” and the importance of “Black dignity.” Garvey’s philosophy of “Black nationalism” held that people of colour needed to establish centres of political power.

Garvey, a Jamaican, focused his work on the urban Black population in the United States. That population increased during the “Great Migration,” the movement of Black Americans from the South to northern cities. Garvey’s philosophy and anti-colonial critique, which emphasized the importance of community and knowledge of Black history and culture, spread through American Black communities.

“Malcolm Little grew up the child of racial-justice pioneers daring enough to promote the radical philosophy of Black self-determination in the far reaches of the Midwest.”

In 1931, Malcolm Little’s father suffered a serious – ultimately fatal – injury in a reported street car accident that may have been a racist assault by the “Black Legion,” a group similar to the Ku Klux Klan. In 1938, Malcolm’s widowed mother was committed to a mental institution, where she remained for more than two decades. Malcolm grew up in foster homes and juvenile facilities and always regarded his father as his hero.

Later in his life, Malcolm embraced the Nation of Islam and its leader, Elijah Muhammad, and took the name Malcolm X. He rose quickly in the Nation of Islam due to his prodigious organizing skills. Malcolm X’s fierce, provocative oratory brought people from around the world into the Nation of Islam.

Martin Luther King Jr. was the son of a prominent Black minister who invested in deep moral principles.

Born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1929, Martin Luther King Jr. was the son of a prominent minister. King Sr., a model of intellectual and moral integrity, was adamant about liberating Black people from the shackles of racism.

“King’s conciliatory image masked the beating heart of a political radical who believed in social democracy, privately railed against economic injustice, and viewed nonviolence as a muscular and coercive tactic with world-changing potential.”

As Malcolm X organized for the Nation of Islam, Martin Luther King Jr. developed a national reputation for leadership as he spurred Black people in Montgomery, Alabama and other southern cities to political action. He became the pastor at Montgomery’s Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, which served an affluent, educated Black congregation.

King delivered his first sermon at Dexter in the same month that the US Supreme Court decided the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education*. During that time, Rosa Parks launched a movement against racist Jim Crow transportation laws and, specifically, against the segregation of Montgomery's city buses. The bus boycott thrust King into the national spotlight as a civil rights activist and organizer.

By the late 1950s, Malcolm X, then a follower of the Nation of Islam, explored the fight against racism in a broad, international context.

Malcolm X's 1959 travels through the Middle East expanded his sense of the struggle for Black dignity and bonded him with other Muslims who opposed colonialism. As a representative of the Nation of Islam and of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X sought to improve relations with the Arab world. Shortly after he returned to New York City, the broadcast of Black journalist Louis Lomax's documentary *The Hate That Hate Produced* made Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam both famous and notorious for supposedly advocating "Black Supremacy."

"He conceived of radical Black dignity as a kind of global citizenship based on a daring combination of human rights and political self-determination."

Malcolm's X's ascent caused unease and suspicion within the ranks of the Nation of Islam. Some questioned whether Elijah Muhammad or Malcolm X made the decisions.

In the meantime, King unsuccessfully implored President Dwight Eisenhower to make a public statement repudiating segregation. King attacked both Democrats and Republicans for allowing racist extremists to control their parties. King didn't yet grasp how Malcolm X understood the concept of "Black dignity." He thought Malcolm X understood it as Black supremacy – a reverse version of Jim Crow, with Black people in control. For Malcolm X, Black dignity meant Black self-determination and a recognition of Black people's humanity.

In 1963, King turned Birmingham, Alabama into the "centre of the world."

In the spring of 1963, in collaboration with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), King sought to desegregate Birmingham, Alabama. Those efforts made Birmingham the "centre of the world" in the civil rights struggle. The Birmingham protests, which included rallies, meetings and boycotts, became a landmark event in US history and forced Americans to confront issues of race and democracy. These protests gained sufficient national attention to turn President John F. Kennedy from a nervous observer into an advocate.

"A genuinely seismic event in American history, the Birmingham protests cleaved the nation in two, forcing citizens of all backgrounds to take honest measure of the intersection between race and democracy in national life."

Headed by infamous segregationist City Commissioner Bull Connor, Birmingham responded to the protests with fire hoses and attack dogs. The police arrested many people, including King. Images of officers bringing him to prison made the national news. During his weekend in solitary confinement, King wrote his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” The letter, refined and scholarly, spoke with eloquence and passion of the persecution of Black people.

People widely misunderstand King’s seminal “I Have a Dream” speech.

King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech as the keynote address at the 1963 March on Washington, DC. While the speech became a landmark of the civil rights movement and of US history, people often misunderstand its principal message. They tend to remember the soaring conclusion, during which King repeatedly intoned “I have a dream,” but they neglect the speech’s extensive commentary on the significance of Black poverty in an affluent country and King’s allusions to reparations for enslavement and Jim Crow practices.

“In the speech, King unveiled an audacious vision of multiracial democracy contoured by an acknowledgment of the frightening realities of racial oppression.”

King articulated an encompassing, bold vision of a diverse democratic country that confronts brutal, violent racial discrimination. The core of his vision was “justice, equality and interracial democracy.” Some 250,000 people attended King’s speech, 100,000 of whom were white. The speech made racial equality the key issue for US political activism and democracy.

In 1964, Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam and committed himself to the struggle for civil rights.

In President Lyndon Johnson’s first State of the Union speech after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, he called for dramatic advances in civil rights and an aggressive war on poverty. These were crucial features of Johnson’s “Great Society” program to heal injustice, embrace diversity and aid those who suffered in poverty. King believed that what he called “Black citizenship” required civil rights legislation and a substantial redistribution of wealth.

“Malcolm and Martin’s parallel vision that located the roots of the Kennedy assassination in racial violence was a shared, although unspoken, politic symmetry between them.”

That March, Malcolm X announced his separation from the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad. He proclaimed his plan to join the civil rights movement and work with its leaders. The leader of the Nation of Islam reacted with tears, but then sought to destroy Malcolm X. Elijah Muhammad did nothing to discourage death threats against his former supporter. Though they were political adversaries, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. recognized their mutual capabilities and interests.

After Malcolm X's assassination, King's politics became more radical.

Assassins murdered Malcolm X at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City on February 21, 1965. Despite the winter cold, more than 10,000 people attended his funeral and even more viewed his body. King delivered sympathetic tributes. He pointed out that Malcolm X overcame personal tragedy and prison and, due to his personal strength and genius, did not become a criminal, but turned instead to religious faith for meaning and vocation. King confirmed that Malcolm X harnessed his passion and abilities for a meaningful purpose.

"Malcolm left a legacy of revolutionary politics that, shortly after his death, would galvanize Black Power activists. But his greatest impact may have been on Martin Luther King Jr."

Malcolm X's death made King more radical. He began to question the relationship between the civil rights movement and the US government, and he recognized that addressing "institutional racism" and poverty would demand more than the Great Society program offered. The effort to secure voting rights brought King back to Alabama; he committed to marching 54 miles from Selma to Montgomery to illustrate the plight of Black citizens in the face of police violence.

In Selma, King and his followers faced brutal police violence in what came to be known as "bloody Sunday," events that ultimately strengthened the movement to secure Black voting rights. King understood that the civil rights movement could aspire to something universal. He saw disparate problems, such as racism, poverty and the Vietnam War as interconnected.

In August 1965 – the year of Malcolm X's murder and King's bloody Sunday in Selma – President Johnson signed the US Voting Rights Act.

In 1967, King transformed from a civil rights leader into a "political revolutionary."

In the spring of 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a sermon at Riverside Church in New York City in which he rejected the Vietnam War and, thereby, Johnson's policies. He said that American warfare in Vietnam and domestic violence in riots protesting urban poverty and blight were both "moral dead ends." King put himself forward as a political radical who spoke to domestic and international issues. He believed the United States needed a "revolution in values."

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X continue to influence movements seeking justice and liberation worldwide.

Malcolm X was always suspicious of the idea that US democracy could overcome the injustices of racism and poverty. King, by contrast, believed large-scale protests could shape the policies and decisions of political leaders. King's optimism enabled him to inspire and collaborate with other political actors, especially those who advocated for peace

and rejected the Vietnam War, such as the nascent Black Power movement and those in a new incarnation on the left.

“For a growing corpus of Black folk around the nation, Malcolm, rather than any group he represented, inspired both belief and action. His domestic activism dovetailed with his political support for global anti-colonial struggles.”

Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee before delivering a speech in support of a garbage strike. His death set off a national crisis and violent riots in US cities. King remains a legendary American icon, honoured with a national holiday. His great legacy was the concept of “radical Black citizenship,” which demands more than an absence of discrimination. The impatient, street-wise Malcolm X became the United States’ “revolutionary truth teller.” Over their lifetimes, the visions of Malcolm X. and Martin Luther King Jr. drew closer to one another. They shaped new generations of people seeking justice and dignity.

About the Author

History professor **Peniel E. Joseph** holds The Barbara Jordan Chair in Ethics and Political Values at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. The author of *Stokely: A Life*, he was founding director of the Centre for the Study of Race and Democracy.