

RUNNING HEAD: Malcolm X and Dr. King

Leadership Differences and Similarities of Malcolm X and Dr. King

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### **Leadership Differences and Similarities of Malcolm X and Dr. King**

Dr. Martin Luther King and el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, better known as Malcolm X, are both remembered as great leaders that made strides for people through their focus on societal equity, racial equality and civil rights. Dr. King was known for his non-violent ways, while Malcolm X was known for a more “hands on” approach if you will. This paper will discuss the differences and similarities of their leadership styles as they both fought for civil rights and better conditions for the people they served.

#### **El Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, Malcolm X**

El Hajj Malik el-Shabazz was born Malcolm Little, but is better known as Malcolm X. As Malcolm X, he was a well-known leader within the Nation of Islam led by Elijah Muhammad. As el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, he was the lesser known founder of Muslim Mosque, Inc. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity. He was once one of the biggest advocates of the Nation of Islam, but in his later days he renounced the organization and formed his own in an effort to fight for justice. Malcolm X is known for his radical ways and sayings such as “By any means necessary,” (X, 1964). This statement was made during a speech signifying the launch of the Organization of Afro-American Unity after he parted ways with the Nation of Islam. Contrary to the belief of many, this statement was not made as war cry or assault on others, but as a call for unity among Afro-Americans. Malcolm’s focus with this statement was one focused on unity and justice.

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He makes the statements, “We want freedom by any means necessary. We want justice by any means necessary. We want equality by any means necessary,” (X, 1964). This was in regard to people of African descent, but not only in the United States of America. Malcolm was seeking freedom, justice, equality and unity for people around the world. He states that the purpose of the organization is as such, “So the purpose of the Organization of Afro American Unity is to unite everyone in the Western Hemisphere of African descent into one united force. And then, once we are united among ourselves in the Western Hemisphere, we will unite with our brothers on the motherland, on the continent of Africa,” (X, 1964).

Malcolm makes it clear that his plan was to include everyone in the Western Hemisphere. To him, “South America is America. Central America is America. South America has many people in it of African descent. And everyone in South America of African descent is an Afro-American. Everyone in the Caribbean, whether it’s the West Indies or Cuba or Mexico, if they have African blood, they are Afro Americans. If they’re in Canada and they have African blood, they’re Afro Americans. If they’re in Alaska, though they might call themselves Eskimos, if they have African blood, they’re Afro Americans,” (X. 1964). His aim was to promote unity in order to achieve freedom, justice and equality. These were the very things that another leader was fighting for.

### **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was born Michael Luther King Jr., and like his grandfather and father he became Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA. Martin grew up seeing the effects of segregation and injustice for black people. He started out on a mission fighting for justice among his people. He served as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and did his best to lead people in nonviolent resistance according to the leadership

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styles of Jesus Christ and Ghandi. Martin stood on the foundations of his Christian roots and used them as a way of building a following that spanned the globe and influenced people of all races. Dr. King was a major proponent for justice, not necessarily by any means necessary, but a proponent, nonetheless.

### **Justice**

While imprisoned in Birmingham, Dr. King takes the time to pen a letter in response to some critical remarks that had been made in regard to his actions. Dr. King makes the statements, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here," and "I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly," (King, 1963).

In chapter 19 of his autobiography, Malcolm X makes a statement in a letter written during his pilgrimage to Mecca. This statement redefines who he is and what he stands for and serves as a sort of break from the person he was and the people he once represented. With this statement, Malcolm was serving notice that he would no longer give into the propaganda spouted by the leaders he once followed. From this point forward, he would simply serve as an agent of change for people in need of justice. He states, "I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being, first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole," (X & Haley, 1965, p. 228).

Malcolm is characterized by many as violent and racist, but much of this spawned from his representation of a religion that pushed him to take on this type of mentality. At his core, Malcolm X simply wanted justice for the people. Like Dr. King, Malcolm X was a freedom

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fighter. The methods may have been a little different, but they were both seeking the same end, justice.

We can see here that both men used letters as a means of communicating their powerful messages to the people. And the message they were both trying to communicate in this instance was that justice was more important than anything. No matter who it concerned, justice was an imperative because injustice anywhere served as an injustice everywhere. Their words are actually quite similar, but the message is undeniably the same. All people deserve justice because on a human level we are all the same.

Dr. King and Malcolm X both saw the need for changes to be made and did their part to address those changes even when they were jailed or in another country. They both fought for the rights of all people. Justice was a key focus of both of their fights and in a way united the two of them.

### **The Fight**

The fight for justice was a bloody one. Whether at the leadership of Malcolm or Martin, people were hurt, jailed and even killed in the fight for justice. In the words of Dr. King, “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed,” (King, 1963). Demanded, not asked for, but demanded. This seems like something Malcolm X would have said, but it is in fact a statement that came from Dr. King while in jail in Birmingham. Dr. King, like Malcolm, was accused at times of being an extremist and was accused of encouraging violence based on his actions.

While in jail Dr. King addressed fellow clergymen and other critics by saying, “You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist. I began thinking about the

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fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle-class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence," (King, 1963). Dr. King was in this case referring to the Nation of Islam of which Malcolm X was a representative. Clearly, Dr. King was not an advocate of violence and in fact spoke against using violence as a means of furthering the cause. He believed that the only way to achieve victory was through peace, but some of his statements and actions in the eyes of others seemed to encourage the opposite.

Unlike Dr. King, Malcolm was clear that violence was indeed an option. At a meeting, Malcolm reportedly shouted the statement, "I don't advocate violence, but if a man steps on my toes, I'll step on his," (X & Haley, 1965, p. 262). To Malcolm, violence was an option in the fight. He spoke about black people carrying guns and protecting themselves. He made the statements, "Every time I had another radio or television microphone at my mouth, when I was asked about "stirring up Negroes" or "inciting violence," I'd get hot. It takes no one to stir up the sociological dynamite that stems from the unemployment, bad housing, and inferior education already in the ghettos. This explosively criminal condition has existed for so long, it needs no fuse; it fuses itself; it spontaneously combusts from within itself," (X & Haley, 1965, p. 228). He was making the attempt to distance himself from violence, but at the same time noting that he would not run from it.

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This type of thinking influenced people like Huey P. Newton, one of the founders of the Black Panther Party. People like Newton criticized Dr. King's nonviolent stance and even after his death carried on the ideas of Malcolm X. Newton states in his book *Revolutionary Suicide* that, "We had seen Watts rise up the previous year. We had seen how the police attacked the Watts community after causing the trouble in the first place. We had seen Martin Luther King come to Watts in an effort to calm the people, and we had seen his philosophy of nonviolence rejected. Black people had been taught nonviolence; it was deep in us. What good, however, was nonviolence when the police were determined to rule by force? We had seen the Oakland police and the California Highway Patrol begin to carry their shotguns in full view as another way of striking fear into the community. We had seen all this, and we recognized that the rising consciousness of Black people was almost at the point of explosion. One must relate to the history of one's community and its future," (Newton, 1973, p. 115).

To people like Newton, the Black Panthers and those that followed his ideology, they could not relate to the ways of Dr. King because of what they had witnessed. They needed a leader like Malcolm that understood their plight and more closely related to their goals. He notes that Black people were ingrained with the idea of nonviolence, especially those that agreed with the Christian faith of which Newton had his roots before dismissing the religion. But for many, nonviolence just didn't make sense.

In a conversation with Dr. King's wife, Coretta Scott King, Malcolm was quoted as saying, "I want Dr. King to know that I didn't come to Selma to make his job difficult. I really did come thinking I could make it easier. If the white people realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King." Malcolm served as the alternative to Dr. King, but in his own words sought to make Dr. King's job easier in a way. Malcolm influenced

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many that may not have agreed with Dr. King's views, but ultimately was on the same side as Dr. King. He was on the side of freedom, justice and equality. In an interview with Louis Lomax on a Cleveland television station in 1964 Malcolm stated, "Dr. King wants the same thing I want, freedom."

Though Dr. King and Malcolm had their differences, their fight was the same. They both wanted freedom for the people. They just went about it with slightly different means. Malcolm was not necessarily for violence, but was also not against it. While Dr. King was for nonviolence, some would say that his ways somewhat encouraged it. The two were different, but quite similar in the eyes of the oppressors and critics of the fight for justice, freedom and equality.

Dr. King was influenced by the ways of Christianity that advocated for peace and made statements such as "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well," (Matt. 5:39-40). These were not necessarily principles that Malcolm adhered to. His devotion to the Islamic faith and Nationalist views allowed for a more active response. To him, there was no issue with defending one's self from an attacker.

In his speech, *The Ballot of the Bullet*, Malcolm makes the statements, "Concerning nonviolence: it is criminal to teach a man not to defend himself when he is the constant victim of brutal attacks. It is legal and lawful to own a shotgun or a rifle. We believe in obeying the law," (X, 1964). While he didn't disagree with Dr. King's fight for freedom, he did disagree with his methods. To Malcolm, he was perfectly within his rights to carry a gun and protect himself and others if necessary. To him, violence was sometimes necessary in a fight, especially when dealing with others that were being violent with him.

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### **Conclusion**

Dr. King and Malcolm X have always served as examples of leadership. Their styles in many ways serve as the framework of powerful leadership. Though they are regarded as different in many ways, the two of them were more similar than people perceived them to be. We oftentimes focus on their differences and believe them to be opposing figures in history and almost rivals at points, but Dr. King and Malcolm X were both necessary. The way they complement each other through their leadership styles provided the basis for much of the change we see in society. Even after their deaths, these two still impact society greatly and still effect change in communities across the world.

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