In part two of my series, *A Better Tomorrow*, I would like to discuss Malcolm X’s speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet", and its historical impact.

Before we begin, I would like to thank my readers for following my series *A Better Tomorrow*. I have been encouraged by the feedback that I received from supporters and readers who have been following my series. As my series continues, I hope there will be more enthusiasm.

Let’s begin our discussion:

Malcolm X may be one of the most polarizing figures in American history. Some call him brilliant, revolutionary, and charismatic, while others call him a divisive demagogue. However, no one can argue he wasn't transformative: a bridge from peaceful non-resistance to militancy.
He was one of our country's most brilliant orators, and many historians believe his "Ballot or the Bullet" speech was his magnum opus. According to the communications departments of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Texas A&M University, “The Ballot or the Bullet” is the seventh greatest speech in American history.

When I first heard this speech years ago, I was in turmoil. I considered myself a leftist but questioned direct action for social change. I believed much of the poor's plight was self-inflicted and, because of their behavior, reinforced the views of the far right. I became cynical of liberals and believed many profited off the poor instead of showing concern for them.

What disturbed me was that major cities like Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington were in the hands of the Democratic Party, and when elected, conditions deteriorated into further despair. Joblessness, poor schools, crime, and drugs seem to climb steadily while liberal leaders either excused or defended this by blaming the white man or the rich. They always argued that if only we had more social programs, things would be better.

When I lived in a homeless shelter it irked me that grown people complain that no one did anything for them. It was always, "why is no one providing for us? Where is the housing, jobs, or food?"

I was glad that I didn't succumb to that. I believed nothing was worth anything if it wasn't bought and paid for. I refused to blame "The Man" for my condition.

Although I didn't have a home, I did have time and spent it at libraries reading many books on poverty. Some of these were The Other America by Michael Harrington and Blaming the Victim by William Ryan. But it was Howard Zinn’s book On Race that reintroduced me to Malcolm X.

I decided to learn more about Malcolm X and revisited this speech.

After rehearing it, I was empowered—he said everything I thought but couldn’t articulate.

Hearing Malcolm X say “the only way we are going to solve our problem is with a self help program” resonated with an individualist like me. Here was an independent message that wasn't targeted to enrage white people. It was an independent message of self-help and personal responsibility for black people. Malcolm's message of self-help and personal responsibility allowed you to remain black without being labeled an Uncle Tom; it was an alternative to the ineffectiveness of singing, marching, and protesting for social justice.

His mistrust of liberals was like a message from heaven. He doesn't sugar coat his contempt by telling his audience that liberals and black civil rights leaders known as “Uncle Toms” have been exploiting the most vulnerable people—the poor.

The “Ballot or the Bullet” speech was more than a self-help and personal responsibility message for black people. It may be the most prophetic political analysis made by an American citizen. Shortly after oratory history was made, he was assassinated, the Vietnam War escalated, and rioting erupted all across America.
When you hear his speech, you can change the dates from 1964 to the present. Also, you can delete the names Johnson, Dr. King, and Congress, and replace them with Obama, Sharpton, and the Tea Party.

Although he calls for Black Nationalism, one can argue he urges a call for all Americans to accept responsibility for the cause of poverty. In his closing argument, he fires a warning to White America: to change their hateful ways, or there will be revolts around the world. After his speech, six months later, riots erupted in the inner cities throughout the rest of the sixties.

However, before we review this rhetorical masterpiece, I would like to chronicle the events that lead up to this historical speech.

On Nov. 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, trying to shore up his southern base for reelection, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. As the nation mourned that evening, President Lyndon Johnson was inaugurated.


While in exile, he went to Miami Beach to befriend a boxer named Cassius Clay who was training to fight Sonny Liston for the Heavyweight Championship. At the time, The Nation of Islam did not think highly of young Cassius for they believed he was arrogant and sure to lose. However, Malcolm and Cassius developed a close friendship, and after he won the Heavyweight Championship, he joined the Nation and became known as Muhammad Ali.

Frustrated with internal battles, on March 8, 1964, Malcolm X announced he would be leaving the Nation of Islam, making known he still was a Muslim, but was now willing to become involved in civil rights. A few days later, he founded Muslim Mosque, Inc., a religious organization, and the Organization of Afro-American Unity that advocated Black Nationalism.

On March 26, 1964, on his way to to hear the debate on Civil Rights in Washington D.C., He passed by Martin Luther King, Jr. The two men shook hands and took a picture together which lasted one minute, and this was the only time they ever met.

On April 3, 1964, Malcolm X went to Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, to address a crowd of three thousand people, many of whom in attendance were white. His longtime companion, Louis Lomax, spoke first then turned the podium to Malcolm X. (All the quotations I use in this article are from his speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet", delivered in Cleveland.)

Malcolm X began his speech by explaining that although he broke from the Nation of Islam, he still remained a Muslim. He declared he wasn't interested in discussing religion and wanted to focus on justice and equality.

Here's what Malcolm X had to say about religion:

“You and I—as I say, if we bring up religion we’ll have differences; we’ll have arguments; and
Politics

Discussing politics was forbidden by the Nation of Islam. His break from orthodoxy became evident when Malcolm X rolled out his new plan for change. A philosophy evolved around community involvement in grassroots activism. On politics, Malcolm X said:

“We must know what part politics play in our lives. And until we become politically mature we will always be misled, lead astray, or deceived or maneuvered into supporting someone politically who doesn’t have the good of our community at heart.

We will have to carry on a program, a political program, of reeducation to open our peoples’ eyes, make us become more politically conscious, politically mature, and then whenever we get ready to cast our ballot, that ballot will be cast for a man of the community who has the good of the community at heart.”

Job Creation

Malcolm X was opposed to government intervention, which was the view of mainstream civil rights leaders through that period. He favored a market-based solution for employment instead of negotiating with the government for programs and employment. He believed the best way to create jobs was for the people in the community to become job creators.

“The black man himself has to be made aware of the importance of going into business. And once you and I go into business, we own and operate at least the businesses in our community. What we will be doing is developing a situation wherein we will actually be able to create employment for the people in the community. And once you can create some employment in the community where you live it will eliminate the necessity of you and me having to act ignorantly and disgracefully, boycotting and picketing some place else trying to beg him for a job. Anytime you have to rely upon your enemy for a job—you’re in bad shape.”

Self-help

Malcolm X opposed public assistance and the culture of dependency it creates, and told his audience a remedy for getting off the plantation of government.

“We need a self-help program, a do-it-yourself philosophy, a do-it-right-now philosophy, a it’s-already-too-late philosophy. This is what you and I need to get with, and the only way we are going to solve our problem is with a self-help program. Before we can get a self-help
program started we have to have a self-help philosophy.

Black nationalism is a self-help philosophy.

Political parties

Malcolm X told his audience that neither party had your interest. When you read this quote, you can can change the time 1964 to the present or the names Johnson and Goldwater to Obama and Romney:

I’m no politician. I’m not even a student of politics. I’m not a Republican, nor a Democrat, nor an American, and got sense enough to know it. I’m one of the 22 million black victims of the Democrats, one of the 22 million black victims of the Republicans, and one of the 22 million black victims of Americanism. And when I speak, I don’t speak as a Democrat, or a Republican, *nor an American*. I speak as a victim of America’s so-called democracy. You and I have never seen democracy; all we’ve seen is hypocrisy.

These Northern Democrats are in cahoots with the Southern Democrats. They’re playing a giant con game, a political con game. You know how it goes. One of them comes to you and makes believe he’s for you, and he’s in cahoots with the other one that’s not for you. Why? Because neither one of them is for you, but they got to make you go with one of them or the other. So this is a con game. And this is what they’ve been doing with you and me all these years.

The black vote

On the black vote, I couldn't say it any better:

You’re the one who put the present Democratic Administration in Washington DC. The whites were evenly divided. It was the fact that you threw 80% of your votes behind the Democrats that put the Democrats in the White House. When you see this, you can see that the Negro vote is the key factor. And despite the fact that you are in a position to be the determining factor, what do you get out of it? The Democrats have been in Washington DC only because of the Negro vote. They’ve been down there four years, and after all other legislations they wanted to bring up, they brought it up and gotten it out of the way, and now they bring up you. You put them first, and they put you last ‘cause you’re a chump, a political chump.

He doesn't stop there:

Anytime you throw your weight behind the political party that controls two-thirds of the government, and that Party can’t keep the promise that it made to you during election time, and you’re dumb enough to walk around continuing to identify yourself with that Party, you’re
not only a chump, but you’re a traitor to your race.

Voting rights

I was in Washington a couple weeks ago while the Senators were filibustering, and I noticed in the back of the Senate a huge map, and on this map it showed the distribution of Negroes in America, and surprisingly the same Senators that were involved in the filibuster were from the states where there were the most Negroes. Why were they filibustering the civil rights legislation? Because the civil rights legislation is supposed to guarantee voting rights to Negroes in those states, and those senators from those states know that if the Negroes in those states can vote, those senators are down the drain.

Human rights

Near the end of his speech he concludes the best strategy for change was to appeal to the U.N.

We have injected ourselves into the civil rights struggle, and we intend to expand it from the level of civil rights to the level of human rights. As long as you’re fighting on the level of civil rights, you’re under Uncle Sam’s jurisdiction. You’re going to his court expecting him to correct the problem. He created the problem. He’s the criminal. You don’t take your case to the criminal; you take your criminal to court. When the government of South Africa began to trample upon the human rights of the people of South Africa, they were taken to the U.N.

His final analysis was for Unity

What you and I is for is freedom. Only you think that integration would get you freedom, I think separation would get me freedom. We both got the same objective, we just got different ways of getting at it.

After this historic speech he made a pilgrimage to Africa. There Malcolm X’s philosophy changed; he evolved from a religious fanatic to an advocate for human rights.

Months later, The Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed, banning discrimination based on race, gender, and ethnicity. He was killed February 21, 1965. On March 8, 1965, the first American combat troops arrived in Vietnam, and in August 1965, riots exploded in the Watts section of LA, leaving 34 dead and costing forty million dollars in property damage.

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