

Malcolm X as Relevant Today as 50 Years Ago

Written by Brian Gilmore

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width="200" height="130" style="float: left; border: 1px solid black; margin: 12px;"/>Fifty years ago, on Feb. 21, 1965, Malcolm X was brutally murdered in New York City. With his assassination, the United States missed a chance to fully address some of the racial issues that persist to this day.

He was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Neb. He was raised mostly in Lansing, Michigan, where his father, Earl, an outspoken follower of the black self-determination proponent Marcus Garvey, was killed, allegedly by white supremacists. Earl's death devastated the Little family and eventually led young Malcolm, an exceptional grade school student, to drift into a life of petty crime and drug abuse.

Malcolm went to prison in Massachusetts some years later. It was here where he found himself and his voice when he converted to the religion and worldview of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam.

Malcolm X emerged from prison a changed man. He became the leading spokesman for racial separatism in America, but also against racism in a very different way from traditional civil rights groups. And he did more than speak out against racism in the abstract; he also spoke out on particular concerns, some of which remain with us.

In a May 1964 speech, he talked about police brutality in black communities.

A black man in America lives in a police state, he said. He doesn't live in any democracy. He lives in a police state.

In February 1965, Malcolm X again responded in a speech in Detroit to the problem of police brutality. This time, he noted the role of the media. The press is used to make it look like (the black man) is the criminal and (the police force is) the victim, he stated.

This statement addresses the phenomenon that has occurred repeatedly in the past few years in incidents of police brutality involving black men killed in New York; Ferguson, Missouri; and other cities.

By the mid-1960s, Malcolm X was a major player in the civil rights struggles in America. His was an alternate view to Martin Luther King's call for togetherness to achieve change.

Malcolm X visited Selma in early February 1965 during the campaign for voting rights at the invitation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He was direct and confrontational.

Since the ballot is our right, he stated, we are within our right to use whatever means is necessary to secure those rights.

Considering all of the current attempts to curtail voting rights through voter ID laws and other such tactics, a voice like Malcolm X on this subject would be quite relevant today.

Malcolm X's place in history continues to evolve. Fifty years ago, more than a life of a great leader was lost. The country also lost a chance to address racial issues that continue to divide the nation.

Poet Brian Gilmore is a public interest lawyer and law professor; his latest book is We Didn't Know Any Gangsters. He can be reached at pmproj@progressive.org