



Malcolm X

This is the first of a four part series on the life and times of Malcolm X.

By Teresa Jefferson
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An African American hero - misaligned, misrepresented and misunderstood for the better part of his life and death. Malcom Little, Malcom X, El Hajj Malik el Shabazz. Even the man's names are provocative and cause for debate. The things of myths and legends. So many names, so many identities and so many messages. With the resurgence of black nationalism, we have all seen the t-shirts, the posters and the goateed, spectacled, blacker than thou look-alikes. But who was this man who even now inspires pride and self-realization in a some and terror and guilt in others? Where did he come from, what did he want and why was he so angry?

Malcom Little was born in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 19, 1925, the fourth of eight children. His mother, who was born in the British West Indies, could easily pass for white. Her mother's rape by a white colonist accounted Malcom's reddish brown skin and hair color. His father, the Reverend Earl Little, was a Baptist minister and loyal Marcus Garveyite. Harassed by local klansman for his outspokenness Rev. Little packed his family up including newborn Malcom and moved to Lansing, Michigan. About six years later the Reverend was mobbed by a group white supremacists, called the Black Legion, beaten nearly lifeless and left to die under the wheels of a streetcar. After his brutal death, the Little family slowly began to disintegrate, and Malcom's mother, overburdened and overworked caring for the large family on her own, had to be institutionalized.

An angry and rebellious Malcom wound up in the foster care of a Lansing white couple. Later Malcom would angrily proclaim that this was the beginning of his education in "white folks' ways." He went to an all-white school where he made top grades, but felt like the school's unofficial mascot. He was even voted class president in the seventh grade. After a short visit with his half-sister in Boston, Malcom became restless and impatient with Lansing's small town racism. He dropped out of school as soon as he finished the eighth grade and ran away to live with his sister in Roxbury, a black ghetto in Boston. He drifted through a series of menial jobs and then turned into the street smart hustler, Detroit Red. At one point during World War II, he was a steerer for a Harlem madam specializing in kinky sex. The clientele came almost entirely from the upper echelons of white society.

Detroit Red, not even 21 years old yet, was finally arrested in 1946 for running a burglary ring in the Boston area. He might have gotten off lightly except that he had involved some upper-class white women, one of whom was his mistress. Malcom was sentenced to 10 years in prison and served seven. While behind bars, he was so generally hostile; his fellow inmates nicknamed him Satan.

During visits his brother first exposed him to the Nation of Islam and Muhammed's ideology that white people were a race of devils created for the torment of the black son and daughters of Allah. Malcom's conversion was associated with a total intellectual transformation. He became a voracious reader, so much so that he damaged

his eyesight. What he learned about European colonization reaffirmed, in his mind, Elijah Muhammed's teaching that the white man was a devil created to oppress black people of the world. When Malcom was paroled in 1952, he went to Detroit where he became an active member of the Nation of Islam. Soon he became a minister, and in 1954 was appointed minister of Temple No. 7 in Harlem, which he made very successful. In 1958 he married Betty X, a devout Muslim and nursing student.

Although the Nation of Islam considered the white man to be the personification of all evil, the sect opposed in principle any struggle against racist oppression. They instead opted to build a business empire valued at one time at \$70 million.

Malcom's fiery message could not be dampened. It soon began to attract not only more followers, but the attention of the white media. At his peak, he was a regular on talk shows, a lecturer on the university circuit and a figure in the diplomatic lounge of the United Nations. He praised Elijah Muhammed continuously in his message second only to Allah for his success. But there was a growing rift between Muhammed and his most popular disciple, probably fueled by envy and rumor. What had been an almost father-and-son relationship stretched thin and finally snapped in 1963. Malcom was silenced from the ministry for a lengthy time. The official reason was because of comments he made after the assassination of John F. Kennedy as a case of "the chickens coming home to roost." He broke from the Nation of Islam in

March 1964, and weeks later he began to study orthodox Islam and made a pilgrimage to Mecca. Malcom would later note that this trip changed him forever. He was for the first time exposed to white Muslims. The pilgrimage broadened his scope, deepened his faith and reduced the American white man in his eyes from the devil to a fallible human enemy.

Malcom was just broadening his message to include a world view when his life was abruptly cut short by assassins' bullets. He was killed at a rally of his fledging Organization of Afro-American Unity in New York in February, 1965. Three black Muslims were arrested, tried and convicted of his murder and sentenced to life in prison. Many believe that the three men were innocent, and the assassination was planned by the CIA or the FBI and allowed to happen by the New York City police. Who ever was responsible for his death did not complete the task. His message of black pride and self-realization lives on, perhaps even more powerful today than it was in the turbulent 1960s. It grows every day reaching more and more people and has increasingly become a part of our popular culture. It is a voice so strong; it cannot be silenced. His message goes beyond a dream. It is a reality that must be reckoned with.

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