



Which Way To Progress?

In the 90s, the age-old debate of methods of advancement continues against a backdrop of numerous challenges

By James Benton
Assistant Editor

African-Americans have always seemed to be at odds over the methods they should use to make progress. In the last decade of the 19th Century, a racial debate emerged between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois over the course of black empowerment in the face of political and economic gains that were slowly being taken away as the post-Reconstruction Redemption movement gained ground in the South.

The battle lines of this ideological classic are familiar to many. Washington was a former slave, Du Bois was a free black. Washington was a product of the vocational training program of Hampton Institute. Firmly ensconced at Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, Washington strove to educate blacks on the importance of vocational education and economic

empowerment. Du Bois was educated at Harvard and the University of Berlin, and was developing at Atlanta University a new, fledgling science—sociology. Du Bois advocated political and social equality instead of adopting Washington's economic strategy as the way for the advancement of America's darker brethren. And so on.

The pattern of two so-called "spokesmen" of black Americans repeated itself in the late 1950s and early to mid-1960s with the rise of leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and El-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, more commonly known as Malcolm X. King, a college-educated minister, became a powerful leader of the Civil Rights Movement through his use of direct nonviolent confrontation, tempered with Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha* (soul force), Thoreau's ideas of civil disobedience and other tactics to expose the moral and ethical wrongs of

segregation and discrimination.

Meanwhile, Malcolm X, who received his education in the streets of Boston and New York, was a former street hustler and convicted felon. He reformed himself and became an outspoken disciple of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, stressing self-segregation from whites. He also advocated self-determination in those segregated communities to build economic power and develop leadership.

Instead of challenging the morals of the oppressor, as King did, Malcolm chose instead to take his case before First World countries, including the newly independent African states, to gain support from them in the United Nations, where he sought to have resolutions passed condemning the United States for its hypocritical practice of legalized segregation and discrimination despite professing equality for all her people.

An important factor that must be considered in the examples above is the inability of each leader to capture the attention and motivation of the entire population of African-Americans. For many years, African-Americans have always used "unity" as a buzzword, a mantra of sorts: We have had a common heritage, they say; therefore, we should have a common destiny. Anything less than a common destiny translated into a pernicious situation of "divide and conquer" that kept African-Americans down. However, all African-Americans have *not* been exposed to the same set of circumstances; consequently, they will share different experiences.

In the above cases, no one ideology was seen as "the way" for African-Americans. Washington's principles applied directly to rural and lower-class black Americans, while Du Bois' aspirations appealed to urban blacks or those of the middle and

upper classes. In this case, those who found favor with Du Bois' goals were most likely to have economic stability, therefore, they sought political gains because they already had the money. And those who found Washington's goals more suitable most likely needed money in order to survive more than they needed the right to vote.

The approaches of King and Malcolm X transcended class, but each encountered regional differences: King's greatest success came in the South, a region steeped in tradition and moralistic culture that took a great influence from religion. As a result, King did not have great success in protesting in the North. Malcolm X, meanwhile, avoided the South until weeks before his death, when he visited Selma, Alabama to set forth an alternative perspective that he believed would make whites more likely to accept King's perspective. Malcolm limited his efforts to the urban North and the interna-