

Malcolm X

When Malcolm Little was growing up in Lansing, Michigan, he developed a mistrust for white Americans. Ku Klux Klan terrorists burned his house, and his father was later murdered — an act young Malcolm attributed to local whites. After moving to Harlem, Malcolm turned to crime. Soon he was arrested and sent to jail.

The prison experience was eye-opening for the young man, and he soon made some decisions that altered the course of his life. He began to read and educate himself. Influenced by other inmates, he converted to Islam. Upon his release, he was a changed man with a new identity.

Believing his true lineage to be lost when his ancestors were forced into slavery, he took the last name of a variable: X.

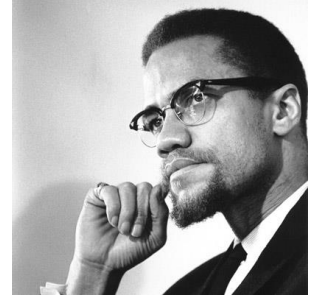
Wallace Fard founded the Nation of Islam in the 1930s. Christianity was the white man's religion, declared Fard. It was forced on African Americans during the slave experience. Islam was closer to African roots and identity. Members of the Nation of Islam read the Koran, worship Allah as their God, and accept Mohammed as their chief prophet. Mixed with the religious tenets of Islam were Black Pride and Black Nationalism. The followers of Fard became known as Black Muslims.

When Fard mysteriously disappeared, Elijah Muhammad became the leader of the movement. The Nation of Islam attracted many followers, especially in prisons, where lost African Americans most looked for guidance. They preached adherence to a strict moral code and reliance on other African Americans. Integration was not a goal. Rather, the Nation of Islam wanted blacks to set up their own schools, churches, and support networks. When Malcolm X made his personal conversion, Elijah Muhammad soon recognized his talents and made him a leading spokesperson for the Black Muslims.

As Martin Luther King preached his gospel of peaceful change and integration in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Malcolm X delivered a different message: whites were not to be trusted. He called on African Americans to be proud of their heritage and to set up strong communities without the help of white Americans. He promoted the establishment of a separate state for African Americans in which they could rely on themselves to provide solutions to their own problems. Violence was not the only answer, but violence was justified in self-defense. Blacks should achieve what was rightfully theirs "by any means necessary."

Malcolm X electrified urban audiences with his eloquent prose and inspirational style. In 1963, he split with the Nation of Islam; in 1964, he made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Later that year, he showed signs of softening his stand on violence and even met with Martin Luther King Jr. to exchange remarks. What direction he might have ultimately taken is lost to a history that can never be written. As Malcolm X led a mass rally in Harlem on February 21, 1965, rival Black Muslims gunned him down.

Although his life was ended, the ideas he preached lived on in the Black Power Movement.



Black Power Movement

On June 5, 1966, James Meredith was shot in an ambush as he attempted to complete a peaceful march from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. Meredith had already made national headlines in 1962 by becoming the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi.

Civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Floyd McKissick of CORE, and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC rushed to Meredith's hospital bed. They determined that his march must be completed. As they walked through Mississippi, they observed that little had changed despite federal legislation. Local townspeople harassed the marchers while the police turned a blind eye or arrested the activists as troublemakers.

At a mass rally, Carmichael uttered the simple statement: "What we need is black power." Crowds chanted the phrase as a slogan, and a movement began to flower.

Carmichael and McKissick were heavily influenced by the words of Malcolm X, and rejected integration as a short-term goal. Carmichael felt that blacks needed to feel a sense of racial pride and self-respect before any meaningful gains could be achieved. He encouraged the strengthening of African American communities without the help of whites.

Chapters of SNCC and CORE — both integrated organizations — began to reject white membership as Carmichael abandoned peaceful resistance. Martin Luther King Jr. and the NAACP denounced black power as the proper forward path. But black power was a powerful message in the streets of urban America, where resentment boiled and tempers flared.

Soon, African American students began to celebrate African American culture boldly and publicly. Colleges teemed with young blacks wearing traditional African colors and clothes. Soul singer James Brown had his audience chanting "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud." Hairstyles unique to African Americans became popular and youths proclaimed, "Black is beautiful! "

That same year, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale took Carmichael's advice one step further. They formed the Black Panthers Party in Oakland, California. Openly brandishing weapons, the Panthers decided to take control of their own neighborhoods to aid their communities and to resist police brutality. Soon the Panthers spread across the nation. The Black Panther Party borrowed many tenets



The Black Power movement turned popular fashion and aesthetics on end. In the 1930s, skin lighteners and hair straighteners were used by fashionable black women in an effort to look whiter. By the end of the 1960s, being proud of the African heritage dictated that afros and dark skin were desirable.

from socialist movements, including Mao Zedong's famous creed "Political power comes through the barrel of a gun." The Panthers and the police exchanged gunshots on American streets as white Americans viewed the growing militancy with increasing alarm.

The peaceful Civil Rights Movement was dealt a severe blow in the spring of 1968. On the morning of April 4, King was gunned down by a white assassin named James Earl Ray. Riots spread through American cities as African Americans mourned the death of their most revered leader. Black power advocates saw the murder as another sign that white power must be met with similar force. As the decade came to a close, there were few remaining examples of legal discrimination. But across the land, de facto segregation loomed large. Many schools were hardly integrated and African Americans struggled to claim their fair share of the economic pie.

<http://www.ushistory.org/us/54i.asp>



The "Black Panther Party for Self Defense" was formed to protect Black individuals and neighborhoods from police brutality. This 1966 photo features the six original members of the Black Panthers.