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**Martin Luther King Jr.,  
Malcolm X, and the  
Civil Rights Struggle  
of the 1950s and 1960s**  
**A Brief History with Documents**

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## *King Is the White Man's Best Weapon*

1963

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*In an interview with Kenneth B. Clark, Malcolm trenchantly criticized King's leadership, charging that white people supported and financed him, that King controlled blacks for whites, and that King's insistence on nonviolence disarmed blacks before racist violence and oppression.*

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*Malcolm X:* . . . The Muslims who follow the Honorable Elijah Muhammad don't advocate violence, but Mister Muhammad does teach us that any human being who is intelligent has the right to defend himself. . . . Mr. Muhammad teaches us to love each other, and when I say love each other—love our own kind. This is all black people need to be taught in this country because the only ones whom we don't love are our own kind. Most of the Negroes you see running around here talking about "love everybody"—they don't have any love whatsoever for their own kind. When they say, "Love everybody," what they are doing is setting up a situation for us to love white people. This is what their philosophy is. Or when they say, "Suffer peacefully," they mean suffer peacefully at the hands of the white man, because the same non-violent Negroes are the advocates of non-violence. If a Negro attacks one of them, they'll fight that Negro all over Harlem. It's only when the white man attacks them that they believe in non-violence, all of them.

*Clark:* Mister X, is this a criticism of the Reverend Martin Luther King?

*Malcolm X:* You don't have to criticize Reverend Martin Luther King. His actions criticize him.

*Clark:* What do you mean by this?

*Malcolm X:* Any Negro who teaches other Negroes to turn the other cheek is disarming that Negro. Any Negro who teaches Negroes to turn the other cheek in the face of attack is disarming that Negro of his God-given right, of his moral right, of his natural right, of his intelligent right to defend himself. Everything in nature can defend

itself, and is right in defending itself except the American Negro. And men like King—their job is to go among Negroes and teach Negroes “Don’t fight back.” He doesn’t tell them, “Don’t fight each other.” “Don’t fight the white man” is what he’s saying in essence, because the followers of Martin Luther King will cut each other from head to foot, but they will not do anything to defend themselves against the attacks of the white man. But King’s philosophy falls upon the ears of only a small minority. The majority or masses of black people in this country are more inclined in the direction of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad than Martin Luther King.

*Clark:* Is it not a fact though—

*Malcolm X:* *White* people follow King. *White* people pay King. *White* people subsidize King. *White* people support King. But the masses of black people don’t support Martin Luther King. King is the best weapon that the white man, who wants to brutalize Negroes, has ever gotten in this country, because he is setting up a situation where, when the white man wants to attack Negroes, they can’t defend themselves, because King has put this foolish philosophy out—you’re not supposed to fight or you’re not supposed to defend yourself.

*Clark:* But Mister X, is it not a fact that Reverend King’s movement was successful in Montgomery—

*Malcolm X:* You can’t tell me that you have had success—excuse me, sir.

*Clark:* Was it not a success in Birmingham?

*Malcolm X:* No, no. What kind of success did they get in Birmingham? A chance to sit at a lunch counter and drink some coffee with a cracker—that’s success? A chance to—thousands of little children went to jail; they didn’t get out, they were bonded out by King.<sup>1</sup> They had to *pay* their way out of jail. That’s not any kind of advancement or success. . . .

<sup>1</sup>Refers to King and the SCLC’s tactic of having schoolchildren demonstrate during the 1963 Birmingham desegregation campaign. Many children were arrested. King was criticized for this daring escalation tactic during the demonstrations, including here by Malcolm.