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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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ments are indispensable. The movement for equality and justice can only be a success if it has both a mass and militant character; the barriers to be overcome require both. Nonviolence is an imperative in order to bring about ultimate community. . . .

On Black Nationalists and Malcolm X

1965

King generally avoided discussing Malcolm and the Nation in public. Rather than directly answering their intemperate charges against him and the nonviolent Civil Rights movement, he mostly chose to ignore them, limiting himself to occasional brief comments. In Alex Haley's interview with him for Playboy magazine, King said about as much as he ever publicly did on the subject.

In this excerpt from the interview, King deplored the NOI and minimized its influence among African Americans; at the same time, he strategically used it to show what might result if white Americans failed to heed blacks' legitimate, nonviolently expressed demands. Even as he distanced himself from radical black nationalists, however, King endorsed the nationalistic stress on a shared identity between Africans and Americans of African descent. King's keen international interests and anti-imperialism were common bonds between him and many nationalists, including Malcolm.

King: . . . The Negro revolution is a genuine revolution, born from the same womb that produces all massive social upheavals—the womb of intolerable conditions and unendurable situations.

Playboy: Is it destined to be a violent revolution?

King: God willing, no. But white Americans must be made to understand the basic motives underlying Negro demonstrations. Many

Excerpt from interview of Martin Luther King Jr., by Alex Haley, *Playboy* (Jan. 1965): 117ff.; reprinted in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), 363–65.

pent-up resentments and latent frustrations are boiling inside the Negro, and he must release them. It is not a threat but a fact of history that if an oppressed people's pent-up emotions are not nonviolently released, they will be violently released. So let the Negro march. Let him make pilgrimages to city hall. Let him go on freedom rides. And above all, make an effort to understand why he must do this. For if his frustration and despair are allowed to continue piling up, millions of Negroes will seek solace and security in black-nationalist ideologies. And this, inevitably, would lead to a frightening racial nightmare.

Playboy: Among whites, the best-known and most feared of these militantly racist Negro sects is the Black Muslims. What is your estimation of its power and influence among the Negro masses?

King: Except in a few metropolitan ghettos, my experience has been that few Negroes have any interest at all in this organization, much less give any allegiance to its pessimistic doctrines. The Black Muslims are a quasi-religious, sociopolitical movement that has appealed to some Negroes who formerly were Christians. For the first time, the Negro was presented with a choice of a religion other than Christianity. What this appeal actually represented was an indictment of Christian failures to live up to Christianity's precepts; for there is nothing in Christianity, nor in the Bible, that justifies racial segregation. But when the Negroes' genuine fighting spirit rose during 1963, the appeal of the Muslims began to diminish.

Playboy: One of the basic precepts of black nationalism has been the attempt to engender a sense of communion between the American Negro and his African "brother," a sense of identity between the emergence of black Africa and the Negro's struggle for freedom in America. Do you feel that this is a constructive effort?

King: Yes, I do, in many ways. There is a distinct, significant and inevitable correlation. The Negro across America, looking at his television set, sees black statesmen voting in the United Nations on vital world issues, knowing that in many of America's cities, he himself is not yet permitted to place his ballot. The Negro hears of black kings and potentates ruling in palaces, while he remains ghettoized in urban slums. It is only natural that Negroes would react to this extreme irony. Consciously or unconsciously, the American Negro has been caught up by the black *Zeitgeist*. He feels a deepening sense of identification with his black African brothers, and with his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the

Caribbean. With them he is moving with a sense of increasing urgency toward the promised land of racial justice.

Playboy: Do you feel that the African nations, in turn, should involve themselves more actively in American Negro affairs?

King: I do indeed. The world is now so small in terms of geographic proximity and mutual problems that no nation should stand idly by and watch another's plight. I think that in every possible instance Africans should use the influence of their governments to make it clear that the struggle of their brothers in the U.S. is part of a worldwide struggle. In short, injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, for we are tied together in a garment of mutuality. What happens in Johannesburg affects Birmingham, however indirectly.¹ We are descendants of the Africans. Our heritage is Africa. We should never seek to break the ties, nor should the Africans.

Playboy: One of the most articulate champions of black Afro-American brotherhood has been Malcolm X, the former Black Muslim leader who recently renounced his racist past and converted to orthodox Mohammedanism. What is your opinion of him and his career?

King: I met Malcolm X once in Washington, but circumstances didn't enable me to talk with him for more than a minute.² He is very articulate, as you say, but I totally disagree with many of his political and philosophical views—at least insofar as I understand where he now stands. I don't want to seem to sound self-righteous, or absolutist, or that I think I have the only truth, the only way. Maybe he *does* have some of the answers. I don't know how he feels now, but I know that I have often wished that he would talk less of violence, because violence is not going to solve our problem. And in his litany of articulating the despair of the Negro without offering any positive, creative alternative, I feel that Malcolm has done himself and our people a great disservice. Fiery, demagogic oratory in the black ghettos, urging Negroes to arm themselves and prepare to engage in violence, as he has done, can reap nothing but grief.

Playboy: For them or for whites?

King: For everyone, but mostly for them. Even the extremist leaders who preach revolution are invariably unwilling to lead what they

¹Johannesburg, South Africa, and Birmingham, Alabama, were two of the most racially segregated cities in the world during the post-World War II decades.

²King and Malcolm's meeting in the U.S. Capitol building on March 26, 1964 (see front cover photograph).

know would certainly end in bloody, chaotic and total defeat; for in the event of a violent revolution, we would be sorely outnumbered. And when it was all over, the Negro would face the same unchanged conditions, the same squalor and deprivation—the only difference being that his bitterness would be even more intense, his disenchantment even more abject. Thus, in purely practical as well as moral terms, the American Negro has no rational alternative to nonviolence.

Playboy: You categorically reject violence as a tactical technique for social change. Can it not be argued, however, that violence, historically, has effected massive and sometimes constructive social change in some countries?

King: I'd be the first to say that some historical victories have been won by violence; the U.S. Revolution is certainly one of the foremost. But the Negro revolution is seeking integration, not independence. Those fighting for independence have the purpose to *drive out* the oppressors. But here in America, we've got to live together. We've got to find a way to reconcile ourselves to living in community, one group with the other. . . .

The Nightmare of Violence: Regarding the Death of Malcolm X

1965

King released the following statement within days of Malcolm X's assassination; ironically, it was the fullest public statement King ever made on Malcolm. In it and similar statements from around that time, King used Malcolm's bloody end as a metaphor for the endemic, escalating violence in American life. While reiterating his still profound disagreement with Malcolm, King wrote of him with genuine respect and sympathy. He noted that "Malcolm was still turning and growing" intellectually and politically at his untimely end, and that his murder "deprives the world of a potentially great leader." King's remarkable analysis of the tragic