Malcolm X: hero or history's footnote?

By Les Payne

What is the legacy of Malcolm X? Is it eloquent menace, pure and simple, or did this ex-convict turned Muslim Minister turned El Haji Malik El Shabazz—whose life was continually spiraling upward—truly bequeath something of value to those who attend his flame?

HARTFORD, June 1963—Entering from stage left in Bushnell Hall, Malcolm X loped into such a hush that his Stacey Adamsses could be heard clacking on the shiny oak floor. Settling quickly at the lectern, he clenched his teeth against a fresh challenge to his status as a national leader. This time it came not from the usual suspects, the half-dozen establishment Negro spokesmen, but from the local afternoon newspaper, The Hartford Times.

Malcolm X blistered a Times editorial suggesting that Hartford Negroes should vote with their feet by boycotting his lecture. Pointing out that Malcolm was the national spokesman for Prophet Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. The paper opined that the Nation's insistence on a separate state for "so-called [U.S.] Negroes" was tantamount to calling for South African apartheid.

Waving the paper above his head, Malcolm sneered at the offending article that pitted him against the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. In a popularity contest hinging on whether Malcolm could draw a larger audience than King had seven months earlier. Malcolm refused reporters' request that he predict attendance at his lecture, wryly telling them instead that if he "failed to outdraw the Rev. Martin Luther King" it would be due to insufficient press coverage.

It was an old ploy, divide and conquer, with such historic precedents as William Monroe Trotter played off against Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois put up against Marcus Garvey. Now director J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI had seized upon the classic tactic to set one Negro force considered threatening to the republic's order (King) against another Negro force they considered even more threatening (Malcolm). While he was a Nation of Islam leader, Malcolm X played into this divide-and-conquer ploy himself, though he apologized to King and the other leaders after being expelled from the Nation of Islam.

Once he neutralized the Hartford media, Malcolm got down to
his two-hour lecture titled, "God's Judgment of America and the Only Solution to the Race Problem." The wit, intellect, and diamond-hard analysis was all Malcolm's, though as always in those days he lectured under the theoretical umbrella of the "Honorable Elijah Muhammad," the Messenger of Allah.

Land in the South for a black state, in preparation from the United States for having "worked our mothers and fathers 310 years without pay," was a key tenet that Malcolm popularized in the name of Elijah Muhammad, whose home-grown Islam brooked no other solutions to "the Negro problem.”

A disciplined organizer, gifted proselytizer, and savvy media promoter, Malcolm made the Chicago leaders of the Nation millionaires by setting up new temples and increasing the membership rolls by the tens of thousands. Malcolm X was irresistibly well-suited for electronic media, and they for him. Writing for The New York World Telegram, columnist Murray Kempton observed, "There have been very few public men whose message fit so snug and yet so lively into a two-minute segment of a news broadcast.”

The media were simultaneously repelled by and attracted to Malcolm X, like zoo visitors before the glass cage of a spitting cobra. The trick that worked so well for Malcolm had him feeding lively news quotes to reporters as they went about inadvertantly pollinating their Negro readers and viewers with philosophies tagged, "thus saith The Honorable Elijah Muhammad.”

Raw, hardened ex-convicts the Baptist church had given up on, Malcolm converted and brought into the temple in the same way that his brothers had earlier led him to the Nation. The Prime Minister also fished Muslim followers quite successfully out of the Christian churches. The first temple Malcolm started himself was in Hartford, which, like the rest of urban New England and, indeed, most of the North, tended to be Martin Luther King country.

The civil rights leader's non-violent movement was southern-based. Unlike Malcolm X, King ventured to New England not so much to buoy white liberals as to raise funds from them. King argued triumphantly that Jim Crow segregation had imbued "blacks with a false sense of inferiority and whites with a false sense of super-
riority.” To Malcolm X, King’s “cruel South” was the piece of real estate sandwiched between the borders of Mexico and Canada.

Non-violent, Gandhian tactics, notwithstanding, King set out to wring the neck of Jim Crow. King focused his Civil Rights Movement upon changing the mind and the behavior of the dominant white society. Malcolm X dismissed all such appeals to the conscience of white America as hopeless and, under the tutelage of Elijah Muhammad, focused instead upon the mind and the behavior of the Negro. Thus it could be said that while King worked upon the segregator’s “false sense of superiority,” Malcolm X worked on the segregated’s “false sense of inferiority.”

Few would doubt King’s significance, given the tangible evidence the Civil Rights Movement managed to wring out of the South: desegregated lunch counters, busses, trains, and other public facilities; the Civil Rights Act; the Voting Rights Act; historic markers on such battlegrounds as the Edward Pettis Bridge; and deep, abiding reductions in the tensions between races. Along the way of course, Rev. King also has been honored, posthumously, with a national holiday.

What footprints in the sands of time witness the passing of El Haji Malik El Shabazz?

Malcolm’s eloquence, drawn from a steely intellect, was not to be denied. No one who knew him came away unimpressed. “I don’t know any intellect superior to [Malcolm X’s],” said legendary New York attorney Conrad Lynn, who held irregular Saturday political sessions with the Muslim leader after his break-up with Elijah Muhammad.

During a lifetime of controversial trial work Lynn had trucked with the likes of W.E.B. Du Bois, Murray Kempton. C.L.R. James, Pedro Albizu Campos, Paul Robeson, the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Arthur Garfield Hays, and Thurgood Marshall, to name a few. Reminded of that, Lynn stuck by his assessment of Malcolm. “As you point out,” Lynn said, “I’ve known some of the great intellectuals of this century . . . I don’t know any intellect superior to his.”

Malcolm X read voraciously and managed to erect historical piling under the dock of Moslem myth-making that includes the Yacub theory on the origins of the white man as a scientific experiment gone wrong. Malcolm trained a cadre of Moslem teachers and insisted on rigorous self-improvement, wide reading, and moral uprightness.

He did not sweeten Elijah Muhammad’s bitter pill for the “blue-eyed devil” media. Malcolm was the first black leader to pin back the ears of reporters as they ate out of his hand. As NOI’s national spokesman, he had first introduced the Muslims in 1959 when CBS televised “The Hate That Hate Produced.” Co-produced by Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax, this documentary hit like a percussion bomb, scarifying whites and endearing Malcolm X to the most well-adjusted as well as the most alienated of Negroes.

Malcolm conducted scorched-earth polemics against global white dominance, hell-bent not so much on changing white Americans’ minds as on hammering away at what he took to be Negroes’ debilitating maladies: dependency, weak morals and, above all, their “false sense of inferiority.”

It was moral turpitude on the part of Elijah Muhammad—his fathering of numerous children with young secretaries out of wedlock—that Malcolm highlighted as the chief cause of his break with the Muslims. After the sect, “a religious-political hybrid, all to ourselves,” expelled him in 1964, Malcolm X spent the last year of his life directing African Americans’ yearning away from Europe and back to their motherlands on the African continent. His own eyes, of course, had been first diverted away from the Eurocentric values of America when, as a young, wayward inmate in a Massachusetts prison, he fell under the sway and tutelage of Elijah Muhammad.

Born to Garveyite parents in a strict Garveyite home, Malcolm absorbed his parents’ obsession, as children tend to do, but manifested no outward signs. Under the influence of his older siblings, however, he seemed to have returned unfaithfully to the teachings of the hearth and was uniquely primed for the global, anti-imperialist, pan-African pursuits of the last, independent year of his life, much of which he spent traveling in the Middle East and Africa before he was assassinated at New York’s Avalon Ballroom in 1965.

While Malcolm X put his decidedly Garveyite point of view on the Nation of Islam, when he broke from the sect, he concentrated on establishing cultural and psychological bridges to Africa. This is one of his lasting contributions, and key to it was first persuading Negroes to overcome their wretched disinclination to accept their original ties to Africa—and their color. That June night in Hartford, Ct., Malcolm X was as effective at purging Negroes of their insidious color shame as he’d ever been outside the mosque.

Throughout his talk, he alternated his flat reference to “blacks” with an occasional qualified “so-called Negroes.” The former lost a rustle of unreadiness among his brethren in the audience. They were not “black” but “Negroes” or “coloreds,” thank you, and proud of it. They rejected Malcolm X’s revisionism as name-calling, bordering on the dozens.

For generations running back to slavery, black was pejorative, period. It conjured up evil, dirty, low-life, unwashed, tarnished, polluted, squail, inferior, and all the other negative connotations so well documented in the dictionaries of the early 1960s, including the one Malcolm X himself had pored over earlier in those Massachusetts prisons. Negroes in the audience and throughout America brought acquiescence and an ironic pride to their current group designation.

Irreverent leaders, such as Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., coming after Garvey, had occasionally attempted the term “black” in the 20th Century, but such brush fires had been contained and squelched. This same year, 1965, a group of Negro students at a Toledo, Ohio, high school organized an angry demonstration after an assistant principal referred to them over the intercom as “black students.”

Many of the Negro Baptists present in Hartford—their religious understanding little changed from childhood—held onto their belief in every prevailing Christian tenet and American orthodoxy including, down deep, their own racial inferiority. Malcolm X shredded every jot and little of this Judeo-Christian-American credo with his terrible, swift sword.

“Now I know you don’t want to be called ‘black,’” he said. The brethren grew restless, some got the feeling he was speaking directly to them. “You want to be called ‘Negro,’ but what does ‘Negro’ mean except ‘black’ in Spanish? So, what you are saying is: ‘It’s OK to call me black in Spanish, but don’t call me black in English.’ ”

This simple analysis jolted several Negroes in the audience to
Typically, one white classmate from nearby Mason, Mich., left the hall bewildered that this fiery, podium speaker had shown no trace of "Harpy," her gentle friend and class president from the eighth grade. That had been young Malcolm Little's last year of formal education, an ordeal his English teacher curtailed by berating him for aspiring to become a lawyer. The white teacher proposed that Malcolm make peace with his birthright as a Negro of the 1930s and aim instead at becoming a carpenter.

The teacher's standard racist misinformation—from everything we have learned about Malcolm's extraordinary, though star-crossed, life's work—lost Malcolm to the bar, a telling forfeiture for the beleaguered legal profession. Malcolm's extraordinary skill at advocacy was a godsend for Elijah Muhammad's fledgling Nation of Islam, however, and the failure of white society to socialize Malcolm was a blessing in disguise for downtrodden blacks and deluded whites.

Though it is not widely acknowledged today, it was Malcolm who consigned the term "Negro" to the scrap heap. He also purged and popularized "black" and paved the way for "African American" as accepted usage, driving both into Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. The "false sense of sense of inferiority" so indelibly stamped on the souls of black folks in America is as difficult to remove as a tattoo. Malcolm performed the conversion with an acid bath of racial counter-rejection, tough-love logic, and a bottom-up primer on American history.

Most blacks he encountered carried deep within them the mark of the conditioned Negro, the most despised—and self-despising—creature in America. He used to test his followers' racial inadequacy by challenging them to try looking white people straight in the eye in their workplace. Most of them reported shamefacedly that, though other blacks posed no problem, they could not bring themselves to look whites in the eye.

By the end of a Malcolm X lecture, some people always felt, no, knew, that something within them had changed irreversibly. Whites, they were moved to see, were no longer superior. Blacks—and this was the most important to Malcolm—were no longer inferior. This cardinal message made Malcolm X a treasure for black liberation and thus a serious threat to white supremacist America.

Malcolm X shook their dungeons, and, as the poet said, the chains fell off. Culture-denuded Negroes with a capitol "N" who came into the hall left as black people. In stripping "black" of its magical powers to dehumanize and impose an inferior status, Malcolm X almost single-handedly re-oriented the "Afro-American": masses toward a healthier sense of their color. With his global analysis, especially during the final, independent year of his life, he primed his people for an appreciation of their African roots and heritage.

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