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The Ballot or the Bullet: A Rhetorical Analysis

Malcolm X was born in Omaha Nebraska but moved to Milwaukee then Michigan as a child after his family was threatened by a white supremacist group because of his father's Pan-African teachings. His mother suffered a nervous breakdown in 1937, and Malcolm and his siblings were sent to foster care, where he remained until adulthood. He dropped out of high school after one of his white teachers told him his dream of being a lawyer was too ambitious because he was black. After leaving school he made money by working odd jobs and other illegal means. He was sentenced to eight years in prison for stealing a watch in 1945. While incarcerated his siblings introduced him to Islam and by 1948 he fully converted to the religion. After his release, he climbed the ranks quickly and was appointed assistant minister of Nation's Temple Number One in Detroit in 1953. By 1954 he was the leader of several temples and membership was growing rapidly. His growing influence in his community was one of the reasons the FBI began surveillance on him, as well as a letter he wrote to President Truman in 1950 declaring himself a communist.

During this period Malcolm X established himself as a gifted leader and rhetorician, and his speeches give us some insight into his connection to community and his thoughts on race and racism. He spread the teachings of Islam in his community and spoke out against white supremacy. By 1964 he had been involved in the civil rights movement for years. Though his ideology was considered controversial by some, he had many avid followers who agreed with his

declarations that white people were devils and the only way to achieve equality was to establish a separate “country” for black Americans, one where they were self-sufficient politically and economically.

Malcolm X's views on politics and economics come to life in his speech, 'The Ballot or the Bullet,' which he delivered twice in April 1964. He used the speech to stress the importance of not only voting but of being politically savvy enough to vote in the best interest of their community. The speech was also a threat to those who he saw as enemies of progress. The speech was successful in getting his points across because of his use of emotional, logical, and ethical appeals.

He started his April 3rd speech with two questions: “where do we go from here,” and “what next?” He answered his own questions stating, “it points to the ballot or the bullet.” In beginning the address with questions, he connected with his audience who after years of fighting for equality were curious about what they should be doing to improve their situation. He postured himself as someone with answers to the questions in the rest of his speech, which was a way of establishing credibility with his audience. The speech went on to explain what is meant by the two options presented, but it’s important to understand why the questions were being asked in the first place.

The civil rights movement had been ongoing for over a decade with some progress, but black Americans were still discriminated against economically, politically, and socially. Malcolm X observed in his April 3rd speech, “We're behind where we were in 1954. There's more segregation now than there was in 1954. There's more racial animosity, more racial hatred, more racial violence today in 1964, than there was in 1954. Where is the progress?” They were still protesting segregation while not owning the businesses in their own neighborhoods. They were

still being lynched and their homes and churches were still being bombed. Despite civil rights bills being passed, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1960 which introduced penalties for anyone found obstructing another's attempt to register to vote, gerrymandering and filibustering prevented actual progress. In the eyes of a lot of people, including Malcolm X there was no tangible progress being made. And worse, politicians continued to make promises of change for black voters, especially during election years like 1964, when the speech was given.

He began the speech by using an ethical appeal for his audience to disregard religion. He introduced himself as a Muslim minister which established credibility among those who followed his religion. He then stated in the April 3rd speech that “although I'm still a Muslim, I'm not here tonight to discuss my religion. I'm not here to try and change your religion. I'm not here to argue or discuss anything that we differ about.” He brought up religion multiple times in the speech to emphasize its unimportance in the fight they were facing. In bringing light to the differences between him and some members of the audience he was also able to establish trust among those who were not Muslim.

He also used logical appeals to make his claim that black Americans needed to take their voting power back by any means necessary. In the April 12th iteration Malcolm X used the history of America as an example. He shared that not only did the thirteen colonies go to war with the British empire because they were tired of “taxation without representation” but they prevailed. They went to war with a mindset of “liberty or death,” fought for their freedom, and won. He also told his audience the truth regarding their continued support for the democratic party. Malcolm X observed, “In Washington, D.C., in the House of Representatives there are 257 who are Democrats. Only 177 are Republican. In the Senate there are 67 Democrats. Only 33 are Republicans. The party that you backed controls two-thirds of the House of Representatives and the Senate and still they can't keep their promise to

you. 'Cause you're a chump.' The use of the word chump was meant to elicit a response from the audience. The insult was intended to make them question why they continued to support a party that did not support them. This combination of fact coupled with emotion emphasized the dire need to make a change to their situation.

Malcolm X also used deliberate language to evoke emotions in his audience. One example of this is in his April 3rd speech where he states, "your vote, your dumb vote, your ignorant vote, your wasted vote put in an administration in Washington, D.C. that has seen fit to pass every kind of legislation imaginable, saving you until last." He wanted his audience to feel silly for their past actions. Their continued support of the democratic party had yielded no fruit and he wanted to bring that to their attention in hopes of them making a different decision in the future. He used a similar tone in his April 12th speech when he said, "This is part of what's wrong with you, you do too much singing. Today it's time to stop singing and start swinging," He was referring to peaceful protests in which participants would march and sing hymns such as "We Shall Overcome." Again, he wanted to make it clear that the solutions the audience were choosing were inadequate. It would not be enough to vote for democrats in hopes that the government would eventually give them equal treatment, nor would it be enough to participate in marches or sit-ins because they were not working. Malcolm X wanted his audience to agree that they needed to do more, then he wanted them to act.

Malcolm X used his standing as a respected member of the community to engage his audience and persuade them to address a problem they all shared. He used logical, ethical, and emotional appeals to convince them that they needed to understand their political power and vote in their best interest. It is important to analyze his use of appeals in speeches such as these because it helps us to understand the purpose of his

rhetoric, what he was trying to say, and how he went about persuading an audience. It's information that can be used to form better arguments or just to have a well-rounded picture of information being presented.

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