

Lesson Plan: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X: A Common Solution?



King and Malcolm X meet for the first, and only time, following King's 26 March 1964 testimony before Congress.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

Introduction

“There is a regrettable tendency to turn our heroes into icons and to take away some of the legitimate activities that were part of their personal and political biography, to freeze them at a stage in their development.” Manning Marable, '92

Years after the deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, the two men still remain fixed images in the American consciousness: Martin Luther King, Jr., an advocate of nonviolence, delivering his “I Have a Dream” speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and Malcolm X, the black nationalist, encouraging African Americans to fight racial oppression “by any means necessary.”

Were these two men really ideological opposites? Did they share any common ground? Were their thoughts about each other and the struggle for African American liberation changing in the years leading up to their assassinations? Is it possible that the two leaders may have converged, if not for their untimely deaths?

While many students are familiar with Martin Luther King, Jr., the civil rights leader, most are totally unfamiliar with his call to bring an end to the Vietnam War or his efforts to bring about economic justice. Students’ knowledge of Malcolm X is even more limited; few, if any, know of X’s efforts to correspond with King or of the dramatic shift in his racial attitudes that followed his trip to Mecca.

The primary goal of this lesson is to challenge students' preconceived notions about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X and the roles they played in the African American Freedom Struggle. While there is certainly much to be learned by examining the different philosophies and tactics of each leader, these two men, who combined their religious leadership with political action, have much more to teach us as we explore how their vision for racial justice developed into a call for social and economic equality and human rights.

Student Objectives

- To explore the ideological and political development of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X through primary source documents
- To identify the various personal, social, and political factors that influenced Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X's leadership
- To understand the opposing philosophies and tactics of King and X, as well as areas in which their ideas converged

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Subject: English Language, U.S. History

Grades: 6-8, 9-12

Teaching Standard: Era 9: Postwar United States, Standard 4a

Essential Question

In what areas did Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X's ideas converge?

Lesson Activities

[Part One: Exploring preconceived notions of King and Malcolm X](#)

[Part Two: The History of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X](#)

Part One: Exploring preconceived notions of King and Malcolm X

Instructions

1. Create two columns on the board with "Martin Luther King, Jr." at the top of one and "Malcolm X" at the top of the other. Have students brainstorm words or phrases that come to mind when they think of each man.

2. Break students into small groups and provide them with handout of quotes by King and X. Have them guess the identity of the author based on the previous exercise. After revealing the appropriate authors, discuss how and why we have these fixed images of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X.

Materials

Handouts:

- [Quote Handout](#)

Resources:

- King Encyclopedia: [Malcolm X](#), [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)

Preparation:

- Read Clayborne Carson's article "[The Unfinished Dialogue of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X](#)"
- Carson, Clayborne, ed. [The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), Chapter 25, "Malcolm X"
- Haley, Alex. [The Autobiography of Malcolm X](#), Chapter 18, "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz"
- PBS Documentary "[Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads – 1965 to 1985](#)"

Part Two:

The History of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X

Instructions

1. The next step in this lesson involves researching the lives of King and X before they became national figures. How teachers approach this section depends on both time and resources. Ideally, students would have the opportunity to read the relevant chapters in both autobiographies. However, if time and/or resources do not allow for students to work with the two books, have students read Clayborne Carson's article "[The Unfinished Dialogue](#)" and visit the King Encyclopedia where they can access a biography of [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), and [Malcolm X](#).

2. Have students work in groups of 2-3 with the article and autobiographies, and list the five major events in each man's life that they believe helped shape their role in the African American Freedom Struggle. Students should consider areas such as family, religion, education, and experience with whites growing up.

3. After the students complete their lists, bring the class together to share what they found, and write the events on the board. Then, as a class, try to reduce the larger list down to the five most important events.

Materials

Handouts:

- Clayborne Carson, [The Unfinished Dialogue of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X](#)

Resources:

- King Encyclopedia: [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), and [Malcolm X](#).