

“Message to the Grassroots” Speech Analysis

Malcolm X at the Grassroots Leadership Conference in Detroit: November 10, 1963

<http://www.blackpast.org/1963-malcolm-x-message-grassroots>

Historical References

Bandung Conference- 1955

Governments of 29 newly independent African and Asian nations met in Bandung, Indonesia to discuss peace, economic development, decolonization and the role of newly independent nations in the Cold War.

Unity of the attendees expressed by agreeing to major goals which would reduce a reliance on Europe or North America:

- Economic and cultural cooperation
- Protection of human rights
- Preservation of self-determination
- End to racial discrimination
- Peaceful coexistence

American, Chinese, Algerian revolutions were examples for the black revolution advocated by Malcolm X.

References to slavery in the Civil Rights Movement:

House Negroes are integrationists (“Uncle Toms”) – passive, peaceful and nonviolent; Christian; attend March on Washington

Field Negroes (hated the masters) are separatists and are the masses, will fight, grass roots revolutionaries out in the streets

Role of Christianity and Islam in the struggle

March on Washington, March on Detroit were sellouts according to Malcolm X

Literary Elements

Paragraph 3

So we are all black people, so-called Negroes, second-class citizens, ex-slaves. You are nothing but a ex-slave. You don't like to be told that. But what else are you? You are ex-slaves. You didn't come here on the "Mayflower." You came here on a slave ship -- in chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken. And you were brought here by the people who came here on the "Mayflower." You were brought here by the so-called Pilgrims, or Founding Fathers. They were the ones who brought you here.

Simile: like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken

Paragraph 6

They were able to submerge their little petty differences and agree on one thing: That though one African came from Kenya and was being colonized by the Englishman, and another African came from the Congo and was being colonized by the Belgian, and another African came from Guinea and was being colonized by the French, and another came from Angola and was being colonized by the Portuguese. When they came to the Bandung conference, they looked at the Portuguese, and at the Frenchman, and at the Englishman, and at the other -- Dutchman -- and learned or realized that the one thing that all of them had in common: they were all from Europe, they were all Europeans, blond, blue-eyed and white-skinned. They began to recognize who their enemy was. The same man that was colonizing our people in Kenya was colonizing our people in the Congo. The same one in the Congo was colonizing our people in South Africa, and in Southern Rhodesia, and in Burma, and in India, and in Afghanistan, and in Pakistan. They realized all over the world where the dark man was being oppressed, he was being oppressed by the white man; where the dark man was being exploited, he was being exploited by the white man. So they got together under this basis -- that they had a common enemy.

Anecdote: The story of the Bandung meeting of oppressed Black people

Paragraph 11

[As] long as the white man sent you to Korea, you bled. He sent you to Germany, you bled. He sent you to the South Pacific to fight the Japanese, you bled. You bleed for white people. But when it comes time to seeing your own churches being bombed and little black girls be murdered, you haven't got no blood. You bleed when the white man says bleed; you bite when the white man says bite; and you bark when the white man says bark. I hate to say this about us, but it's true. How are you going to be nonviolent in Mississippi, as violent as you were in Korea? How can you justify being nonviolent in Mississippi and Alabama, when your churches are being bombed, and your little girls are being murdered, and at the same time you're going to violent with Hitler, and Tojo, and somebody else that you don't even know?

Allusion: references to African Americans fighting for the U.S. in Korea and WWII

Paragraph 23

Just as the slavemaster of that day used Tom, the house Negro, to keep the field Negroes in check, the same old slavemaster today has Negroes who are nothing but modern Uncle Toms, 20th century Uncle Toms, to keep you and me in check, keep us under control, keep us passive and peaceful and nonviolent. That's Tom making you nonviolent. It's like when you go to the dentist, and the man's going to take your tooth. You're going to fight him when he starts pulling. So he squirts some stuff in your jaw called novocaine, to make you think they're not doing anything to you. So you sit there and 'cause you've got all of that novocaine in your jaw,

you suffer peacefully. Blood running all down your jaw, and you don't know what's happening. 'Cause someone has taught you to suffer -- peacefully.

Allusion: refers to “modern Uncle Toms, 20th century Uncle Toms” a reference to the famous novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This allusion appears many times in the speech.

Musical Passages

Paragraph 2

What you and I need to do is learn to forget our differences. When we come together, we don't come together as Baptists or Methodists. You don't catch hell 'cause you're a Baptist, and you don't catch hell 'cause you're a Methodist. You don't catch hell 'cause you're a Methodist or Baptist. You don't catch hell because you're a Democrat or a Republican. You don't catch hell because you're a Mason or an Elk. And you sure don't catch hell 'cause you're an American; 'cause if you was an American, you wouldn't catch no hell. You catch hell 'cause you're a black man. You catch hell, all of us catch hell, for the same reason.

Repetition/Parallel Organization: you don't...'cause

Paragraph 4

We have a common enemy. We have this in common: We have a common oppressor, a common exploiter, and a common discriminator. But once we all realize that we have this common enemy, then we unite on the basis of what we have in common. And what we have foremost in common is that enemy -- the white man. He's an enemy to all of us. I know some of you all think that some of them aren't enemies. Time will tell.

Repetition: common enemy, common oppressor, common exploiter, common discriminator

Paragraph 10

Look at the American Revolution in 1776. That revolution was for what? For land. Why did they want land? Independence. How was it carried out? Bloodshed. Number one, it was based on land, the basis of independence. And the only way they could get it was bloodshed. The French Revolution -- what was it based on? The land-less against the landlord. What was it for? Land. How did they get it? Bloodshed. Was no love lost; was no compromise; was no negotiation. I'm telling you, you don't know what a revolution is. 'Cause when you find out what it is, you'll get back in the alley; you'll get out of the way. The Russian Revolution -- what was it based on? Land. The land-less against the landlord. How did they bring it about? Bloodshed. You haven't got a revolution that doesn't involve bloodshed. And you're afraid to bleed. I said, you're afraid to bleed.

Call and response: Malcolm X poses question after question to get a response from the audience.

Paragraph 12

If violence is wrong in America, violence is wrong abroad. If it's wrong to be violent defending black women and black children and black babies and black men, then it's wrong for America to draft us and make us violent abroad in defense of her. And if it is right for America to draft us, and teach us how to be violent in defense of her, then it is right for you and me to do whatever is necessary to defend our own people right here in this country.

Parallel structure: If it's right for...then it's right...

Paragraph 17

A revolution is bloody. Revolution is hostile. Revolution knows no compromise. Revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way. And you, sitting around here like a knot on the wall, saying, "I'm going to love these folks no matter how much they hate me." No, you need a revolution. Whoever heard of a revolution where they lock arms, as Reverend Cleage was pointing out beautifully, singing "We Shall Overcome"? Just tell me. You don't do that in a revolution. You don't do any singing; you're too busy swinging. It's based on land. A revolutionary wants land so he can set up his own nation, an independent nation. These Negroes aren't asking for no nation. They're trying to crawl back on the plantation.

Repetition/ Rhythm: revolution is...revolution is

You don't do any singing; you're too busy swinging

Paragraph 22

The field Negro was beaten from morning to night. He lived in a shack, in a hut; He wore old, castoff clothes. He hated his master. I say he hated his master. He was intelligent. That house Negro loved his master. But that field Negro -- remember, they were in the majority, and they hated the master. When the house caught on fire, he didn't try and put it out; that field Negro prayed for a wind, for a breeze. When the master got sick, the field Negro prayed that he'd die. If someone come to the field Negro and said, "Let's separate, let's run," he didn't say "Where we going?" He'd say, "Any place is better than here." You've got field Negroes in America today. I'm a field Negro. The masses are the field Negroes. When they see this man's house on fire, you don't hear these little Negroes talking about "our government is in trouble." They say, "The government is in trouble." Imagine a Negro: "Our government"! I even heard one say "our astronauts." They won't even let him near the plant -- and "our astronauts"! "Our Navy" -- that's a Negro that's out of his mind. That's a Negro that's out of his mind.

Refrain: that's a Negro that's out of his mind. That's a Negro that's out of his mind.

Paragraph 29

When Martin Luther King failed to desegregate Albany, Georgia, the civil-rights struggle in America reached its low point. King became bankrupt almost, as a leader. Plus, even financially,

the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was in financial trouble; plus it was in trouble, period, with the people when they failed to desegregate Albany, Georgia. Other Negro civil-rights leaders of so-called national stature became fallen idols. As they became fallen idols, began to lose their prestige and influence, local Negro leaders began to stir up the masses. In Cambridge, Maryland, Gloria Richardson; in Danville, Virginia, and other parts of the country, local leaders began to stir up our people at the grassroots level. This was never done by these Negroes, whom you recognize, of national stature. They controlled you, but they never incited you or excited you. They controlled you; they contained you; they kept you on the plantation.

Repetition: They controlled you...they...they...

Paragraph 36

Originally, they weren't even in the march. You was [sic] talking this march talk on Hastings Street -- Is Hastings Street still here? -- on Hasting Street. You was talking the march talk on Lenox Avenue, and out on -- What you call it? -- Fillmore Street, and Central Avenue, and 32nd Street and 63rd Street. That's where the march talk was being talked. But the white man put the Big Six [at the] head of it; made them the march. They became the march. They took it over. And the first move they made after they took it over, they invited Walter Reuther, a white man; they invited a priest, a rabbi, and an old white preacher. Yes, an old white preacher. The same white element that put Kennedy in power -- labor, the Catholics, the Jews, and liberal Protestants; [the] same clique that put Kennedy in power, joined the march on Washington.

Call and response: Malcolm X expects to elicit responses to his questions