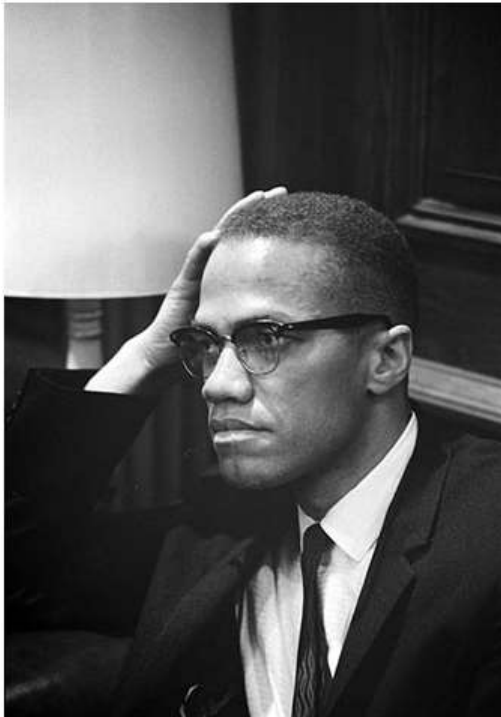


# Malcolm X

## Malcolm X



### Record Information

Source: Library of Congress. Prints and Photographs Division. U.S. News & World Report Magazine Photograph Collection.

Record Type: Photograph or Illustration

Date: b. 1925–d. 1965

Also Known As: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz; Malcolm Little;

### Description:

Malcolm X was born in Omaha, Nebraska. Also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, he joined the black Muslims while serving a prison term. After his release in 1952, he became a Muslim minister and quickly gained a large following. Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad suspended Malcolm X from the Nation of Islam in 1963 over comments he made regarding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Referring to the Kennedy assassination as a case of "chickens coming home to roost," he meant that since the United States was a violent society, it was not surprising that one of its leaders

Born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 19, 1925, **Malcolm** Little was the third son of Earl and Louise Little. His parents were both active members in Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association—a fact that ultimately helped shape **Malcolm**'s Pan-African perspective on culture, human rights, political struggle, and world history. After having their house burned to the ground by the Ku Klux Klan in Omaha, Earl and Louise Little moved their family to Lansing, Michigan. As in Omaha, the Littles' expressions of black pride, economic independence, and cultural integrity riled the social sensibilities of Lansing's white citizenry. Earl Little died after being run over by a streetcar in downtown Lansing, in 1931.

After the death of his father, **Malcolm**'s childhood and adolescence took a drastic turn for the worse. The family's economic self-sufficiency disappeared as Louise Little found herself depending on state aid for her family's subsistence. As social workers made repeated visits to the Little household, her psychological health finally declined. Eventually, the state declared her mentally unfit to rear her children and committed her to the state mental hospital at Kalamazoo. The court then placed **Malcolm** and his siblings into different orphanages. Although **Malcolm** had been among the top students in his class, his performance in school weakened during this time. After completing the eighth grade, he dropped out of school and moved to Boston to live with his half sister Ella. **Malcolm** traveled between Boston and New York, taking jobs as a shoeshine boy

and porter before settling on the vices offered in Harlem's street life at age 16. His rapid descent into the moral abyss of Harlem's underworld was countered only by the notoriety he gained as one of the most successful and flamboyant drug-dealing pimps in the city. A professional con artist and numbers runner, **Malcolm** quickly began abusing the drugs and alcohol that he sold to members of Harlem's political and social elite. In time, **Malcolm**'s lifestyle caught up with him, and he went to prison on burglary charges in 1946.

While serving his time in prison, **Malcolm** found solace and wisdom in the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam (NOI). Elijah Muhammad's instruction on the importance of family life, black pride, economic independence, literacy, thrift, self-discipline, and self-knowledge resonated with **Malcolm**'s life experiences. In the course of a year, **Malcolm** experienced a spiritual transformation, became a member of the NOI, and changed his name to **Malcolm X**. He began to participate on prison debate teams and to study the philosophy and writings of Herodotus, Socrates, Shakespeare, and Gandhi. Most important, **Malcolm** regained his cultural awareness while mastering the English language by memorizing the English dictionary.

Paroled in 1952, **Malcolm** committed himself to serving the NOI, earning the attention of prophet and founder Elijah Muhammad, who made **Malcolm** minister of Temple No. 12 in Philadelphia. **Malcolm**'s skills as a prolific orator, master scholar, and brilliant organizer were further rewarded when Muhammad made **Malcolm** minister of Temple No. 7 in Harlem and NOI National Spokesperson in 1961. From 1954 to 1960 **Malcolm** continued to spread the teachings of Elijah Muhammad nationally and internationally. Throughout the 1950s, he traversed the country, organizing 49 NOI temples. Membership in the NOI increased to 40,000 during this period. In 1960 **Malcolm X** created the newspaper *Muhammad Speaks* in the basement of his home in New York to communicate further the teachings and philosophy of Elijah Muhammad. *Muhammad Speaks* became the largest circulating weekly in the history of the African-American press.

In 1963 **Malcolm X** confronted Elijah Muhammad after learning of Muhammad's marital infidelities with members of the NOI. Muhammad's inability to admit his humanness to the body of the NOI led **Malcolm** to question the divine nature of Muhammad's mission to Afro-Asiatic people. In the process of questioning his own ethics, **Malcolm** committed his first act of rebellion against Muhammad by making critical remarks about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Although Muhammad placed **Malcolm** on indefinite suspension for his remarks, **Malcolm** broke all ties with the NOI on March 8, 1964. He created the Muslim Mosque Incorporated (MMI) as a way for Muslims in America to practice Sunni Islam in a communal environment. In April 1964, he fulfilled the Islamic requirement to make hajj, an experience that forever altered his perception of the possibilities of humanity. Both during and after his affiliation with the NOI, **Malcolm X** presented a critical challenge for the other major African-American leader of his time, Martin Luther King, Jr. He disagreed with King's use of nonviolence as a strategy to gain social, political, or

economic justice and in its place offered a philosophy of human unity based on mutual human respect. Likewise, **Malcolm X** and King disagreed on the basic definition of freedom. While **Malcolm X** did not believe that African Americans could achieve freedom through integrating diners, public accommodations, or transportation, he considered freedom to be the absence of police brutality and of economic and political exploitation.

Furthermore, as a Pan-Africanist, **Malcolm X** understood the African-American struggle for social and political equality in America within the context of the worldwide liberation movements taking place among other African peoples in the world at the time. He created the Organization for African American Unity (OAAU) in the spirit of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) for the purpose of organizing African peoples in the Western Hemisphere. With this in mind, he traveled throughout Africa and the Middle East attempting to garner international support of the OAAU's effort to have the United States of America brought before the United Nations on charges of violating the human rights of African Americans. Before he moved forward with these plans, **Malcolm X** was murdered at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, on February 21, 1965. **Malcolm X**'s insistence on the dignity of African culture and heritage and the centrality of Africa in the African-American struggle for human rights was perhaps his greatest philosophical influence on the literature produced during the Black Arts Movement.

**Malcolm X** delineated and dispersed his powerful and at times strident ideas ("revolution by any means necessary") and ideology in his writings, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965; written with Alex Haley) and several of his now-classic speeches and lectures. He added his voice to those of such important literary forerunners as *David Walker*, *Frederick Douglass*, *Henry Highland Garnett*, and *Marcus Garvey*. The best-known speeches/essays include "Message from the Grass Roots" (1964), "The Ballot or the Bullet" (1964), "The Oxford Debate" (1964), and "The Last Message" (1965). The recurring theme in these essays, as in *The Autobiography*, is the need for black people to unite to defeat white racism and black oppression wherever they are found. For example, in "Message to the Grass Roots" he admonishes, "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." **Malcolm X**'s speeches and essays also record his development and ideological metamorphosis to a more global perspective and an emphasis on human rights.

## References and Further Information

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