

# Malcolm X: “The Ballot or the Bullet”

## Textual Analysis by Anne Marie Renalds, English 101

“The Ballot or the Bullet,” by Malcolm X, is an influential speech empowering the black community to fight the control of the “white man” by using the ballot or the bullet. Malcolm X uses the “white man” metaphorically because he is not referring to the friendly white neighbor living next door. The “white man” is a theoretically evil person who blasts peaceful protestors with fire hoses and attacks innocent children with ravenous dogs. The “white man” oppresses the black community in every possible way. Malcolm X urges his followers to join organizations, such as the NAACP and CORE, to spread Black Nationalism, and to bring awareness to the problems affecting blacks. His inspiration encourages oppressed blacks to fight the oppression of the “white man” by means of the ballot or the bullet. Yet, could the ballot or the bullet metaphor have a different effect on 21<sup>st</sup> century society? Because of the effects of violence in today’s media, a young person who has not been educated about the history and meaning of the ballot or bullet metaphor could develop the wrong impression of this historical phrase as well as current, violent political rhetoric; therefore, young people should be educated about political language, and politicians need to become more aware of the words they say in any form of public media.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, authors of *Metaphors We Live By*, define metaphor as a “device of the poetic imaginations and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language.” Lakoff and Johnson describe metaphors that involve power “having control or force [as] up and [those that involve] being subject to control or force [as] down.” This means that if one person has control over another person they are in a “superior position” and thus more powerful, and metaphors of upward motion or position will express this power dynamic. Malcolm X refers to a similar phenomenon when he describes the “white man” who considers himself in a position of power because of race. Although the Constitution gives blacks equal rights, in the 1960s blacks were still confronted with brutal policemen and inhumane acts of race-based violence during peaceful protests. The “white man” felt he had domination over the black community: the white man was up and the black man was down. Malcolm X uses “extraordinary rather than ordinary language” to describe the oppression of the white man in order to urge his followers to fight their persecutors with either the bullet or the ballot.

Stressing this choice between the bullet or the ballot, Malcolm X insists that, “It’s one or the other in 1964. It isn’t that time is running out—time has run out!” He continues to suggest that the “white man” wants the African American vote but then gives the black community nothing in return. By using the threat of the ballot or the bullet, the black community can fight oppression, segregation, and in turn receive respect like the majority of American citizens. Based on my interpretation, Malcolm X’s speech empowered the black community to unite and fight racial persecution. I believe the end of segregation, lynching, and oppression was directly related to this speech because Malcolm X’s followers were inspired to come together and defend their rights. However, during the 1960’s, violent forms of entertainment, including video games and movies, were uncommon; therefore, Malcolm X’s references toward violence, such as, “kill that dog, kill him, I’m telling you, kill that dog,” were not taken literally. People did not go around killing police dogs after Malcolm X’s speech. Yet, the “killing the dog” metaphor did encourage the black community to stand up against the symbolic master of the dogs, the “white man.” Because of the violence portrayed in video games, this same type of metaphor could be interpreted differently in today’s society. The popular videogame, *Call of Duty*, has an option to send dogs to attack the opposing team. In return, the rival team kills the dogs if the dogs do not attack them first. Since these popular video games portraying violence and war are readily available to uneducated

teens, it would be easy for a young person to confuse a politician's campaign slogan as a literal call to arms. While it is true that civil rights are not a serious issue for blacks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, violence is a serious issue directly affecting all Americans.

Politicians today may feel they are in a powerful position and can use this power to say and do whatever they choose. Especially when politicians are using slogans such as, "the battleground that Arizona has been," the recurring ballot or the bullet, and other violent metaphors directed toward opposing running mates (Gregory), our political discourse suffers from violent conflict. The politicians during the 1960's are similar to the politicians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they all make promises they do not keep. Malcolm X's argument is the same argument American citizens have been making the last 40 years after his speech. Politicians might be in a position of power and have the ability to say whatever they please, but the ideas they propose and the metaphors they use to propose them are important to the people who listen to their speeches.

I believe the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the ballot or the bullet slogan and the effects of the slogan on a community can be seen in the recent battle cries of politicians. Although these cries might not have directly caused the tragedy in Arizona, the controversies involving political rhetoric after the shooting could have been avoided. Catherine Crabill, Republican legislative nominee for Virginia's 99<sup>th</sup> District, emphatically quotes Patrick Henry as part of her campaign rhetoric, "If war is inevitable, then let it come, I repeat sir, let it come" (qtd. in Neiwert). She then shouts, "We have the chance to fight this battle [against Democrats] at the ballot box before we have to resort to the bullet box. But that's the beauty of our Second Amendment right. . . . Our Second Amendment right was to guard against tyranny!" (qtd. in Neiwert). In this case, Crabill is calling upon people who have the right to vote to use their right, but if they lose in a legitimate, civil election, to resort to the "bullet." This is a radically different use of Malcolm X's famous quote. If politicians spent less time trying to generate war between the right and left sides and more time working together to improve Americans' trust in government, then the tragic shooting of Democratic Representative Gabrielle Giffords in Arizona might not have been so controversial and divisive. Yet, the reality is that politicians are constantly shouting offensive and violent remarks at the opposing side. Their vocabulary is intimidating, aggressive, and needs to be corrected. Therefore the question is: could the tragedy in Arizona have been avoided by careful word choice? I believe the answer is not as simple as politicians watching the words they say. I believe the American mindset needs to be transformed, politicians need to become more aware of the way they express their opinions, and young adults should be educated about the metaphors used in adult and political language.

Lakoff and Johnson suggest that metaphors are an important part of language and everyday life. I pose the question: could these commonplace metaphors have a negative effect? Phrases such as "His criticisms were right on *target*," and "He *shot down* all of my arguments" seem harmless but could have the wrong connotation (Lakoff and Johnson). Other countries do not use metaphors associated with war, so why is the American language so violent when people are arguing? I feel these associations with war and violence have a negative effect on debates and arguments. Rather than having a civil conversation to solve a dispute, Americans become very defensive and aggressive during arguments. The argument becomes a competition, and a potentially violent one where the ballot and the bullet start to mean the same thing. As Lakoff and Johnson state, "We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent." During political debates, politicians often become defensive and aggressive when discussing heated topics. I think the American people would prefer to see politicians work together on ideas, rather than lash out at each other in a political war of words. If all their hostile energy could be directed into solving issues, such as how to prevent another political shooting, I think the American people would begin to trust the government and use the ballot again.

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