

Letter from Birmingham Jail:

Overview: On April 12, 1963 King was arrested for breaking an Alabama injunction against demonstrations in Birmingham. He was placed in solitary confinement and on April 16th he read a letter from Alabama clergymen published in the *New York Times* in which they criticized King and the Birmingham Movement for inciting civil disturbances. King wrote his response along the margin of the paper.

16 April 1963

My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms...

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative...

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "n*****," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience...

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,
Martin Luther King, Jr.

BIRMINGHAM'S RACIAL

SEGREGATION ORDINANCES

BIRMINGHAM'S RACIAL SEGREGATION ORDINANCES

The following is an excerpt from the original city ordinances for the city of Birmingham. The ordinances are posted in the Institute's Barriers Gallery.

SECTION 369. SEPARATION OF RACES.

It shall be unlawful to conduct a restaurant or other place for the serving of food in the city, at which white and colored people are served in the same room, unless such white and colored persons are effectually separated by a solid partition extending from the floor upward to a distance of seven feet or higher, and unless a separate entrance from the street is provided for each compartment.

SECTION 597. NEGROES AND WHITE PERSONS NOT TO PLAY TOGETHER.

It shall be unlawful for a negro and a white person to play together or in company with each other in any game of cards or dice, dominoes or checkers.

Any person, who being the owner, proprietor, keeper or superintendent, of any tavern, inn, restaurant or other public house or public place, or the clerk, servant or employee or such owner, proprietor, keeper or superintendent, knowingly permits a negro and a white person to play together or in company with each other at any game with cards, dice, dominoes or checkers, in his house or on his premises shall, on conviction, be punished as provided in section 4.

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SECTION 1002. SEPARATION OF RACES.

Every common carrier engaged in operation streetcars in the city for the carriage of passengers shall provide equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races by providing separate cars or by clearly indicating or designating by physical visible marks the area to be occupied by each race in any streetcar in which the two races are permitted to be carried together and by confining each race to occupancy of the area of such streetcar so set apart for it.

Every common carrier engaged in operating streetcars in the city for the carrying of passengers shall provide for each car used for white and colored passengers, separate entrances and exits to and from such cars in such manner as to prevent intermingling of the white and colored passengers when entering or leaving such car, but this provision for separate entrances and exits shall not apply to the cars operated on the following lines: The South Highlands, Idlewild and Rugby Highland lines or routes.

It shall be unlawful for any such common carrier to operate or cause or allow to be operated, or for any servant, employee or agent of any such common carrier to aid in operating for the carriage of white or colored passengers, any streetcar not equipped as provided in this section. And it shall be unlawful for any person, contrary to the provisions of this section providing for equal and separate accommodations for the white and colored races on streetcars, to ride or attempt to ride in a car or a division of a car designated for the race to which such person does not belong.

Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam, and Black Nationalism

Background information on Malcolm X:

Malcolm X was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1925, the fourth of eight children, whose birth name was Malcolm Little. When he was six years old, his father was murdered by a group of white men because of his involvement in a group called the Universal Negro Improvement Association, or UNIA. The UNIA was founded by Marcus Garvey and preached a philosophy of “black separatism” and black pride. Its goal was to get millions of African Americans to return to Africa because, as Garvey stated, blacks could never be treated justly in a country ruled by whites.

His father’s death destroyed Malcolm’s home life. His mother went insane and all of the children were placed into different foster homes. Malcolm was a very bright student, but he was an angry and bitter child. As he grew older, he lost interest in school. At age 15, he left school and went to live with an older half-sister in Boston. For the next several years Malcolm lived the life of a street hustler, making money illegally and in 1945 was sent to jail for a series of burglaries. He was sentenced to seven years in prison all before his 21st birthday.

While in prison, Malcolm learned that two of his brothers had joined a religious group called the Nation of Islam. The members of this group were called “Black Muslims.” They led by a man named Elijah Muhammad. They supported the idea of Black Nationalism, an idea that supported racial separation for black Americans. The group viewed white Americans with suspicion, if not outright hatred and had no interest in integration with white society. The Black Muslims operated their own stores, farms and restaurants and they also preached a strict code of member behavior. Eating pork and using alcohol, tobacco and drugs was prohibited. When he was released from prison in 1952, Malcolm moved to Detroit to join the Nation of Islam. As other Black Muslims had done, Malcolm changed his last name. Black Muslims considered their family names to be part of their slave past, so they rejected them in favor of the suffix “X.” Malcolm Little was reborn as Malcolm X.

Malcolm X rose quickly within the Black Muslim movement. By 1954, he was named minister of a temple in Harlem, NY. Before long, he was the Nation of Islam’s most well-known spokesperson. By the early 1960s, Malcolm X spoke out against white racism and called for “any means necessary” to retaliate against that racism – including violence. At the

same time, he publicly criticized any African American who favored cooperating with the “white establishment” in America, including those who were seeking to integrate blacks into all segments of white society.

By 1964, Malcolm X had become the most famous Black Muslim in America. He continued to push his radical civil rights views, which had begun to catch on in urban black ghettos across the country. Malcolm’s popularity cause some resentment within the Nation of Islam, and a rift (division) developed between him and Elijah Muhammad. As a result, Malcolm X left the group in 1964. However, he stated he would remain a Muslim and continue to preach his separatist racial views.

In 1964, Malcolm X made a pilgrimage to the Middle East. In Mecca, the spiritual home of Islam, he was impressed by the harmony he saw among the various racial groups who visited there. Because of this experience, Malcolm X began to modify his feelings about cooperating with white people. Late in 1964 he stated “we will work with anyone, any group, no matter what their color is, as long as they are genuinely interested in talking the types of steps necessary to bring an end to the injustices that black people in this country are afflicted by.”

By early 1965, Malcolm had become extremely unpopular with a segment of the Nation of Islam. He received death threats. His house was burned down. Finally, on February 21, 1965, he was assassinated by three men, two of whom were Nation of Islam members. All three men were convicted of murder and sentenced to prison. The question of who, if anyone, had ordered Malcolm’s assassination remained unanswered.

Questions from the reading and video:

1. What was the Nation of Islam (the Black Muslims)?
2. What do you think Malcolm X meant by “any means necessary”?
3. What did Malcolm X mean by “black nationalism”?

