

**The
BLACK
C o m m e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

Issue 177 – March 30 2006

Malcolm and Martin:
The Struggle Continues
by Jason Bailey
Guest Commentator

[click here to become a](#)

bc PAID SUBSCRIBER

(Use the back button on your browser to return to the previous page)

Printer Friendly – PDF Format



Copyright © 2002 - 2006
www.BlackCommentator.com
All Rights Reserved

Recently I was helping my mother clean out her closets and get rid of old boxes. During the flurry of trashing old papers and reliving cherished memories Mother came upon a postcard that her late sister, my favorite aunt, kept in her office when she was a professor at the University of Missouri–Columbia. The postcard was a picture of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. during their only meeting. I have seen a picture of this meeting before, but not this picture.

The picture I am familiar with had the pair shaking hands side by side and smiling. It's a classic photo—op today's politicians engage in all the time. The smiles are sincere but you get the sense that right before it was snapped a cameraman said "hold it, let me get a picture of this." For years I loved that picture because it was the only photo I knew of that showed two of my heroes together in the same place. I always assumed that it was the only picture of that meeting so when I saw this picture I was surprised and gratified.

The picture post card that my mother discovered seems like it was taken after the photo I am so familiar with. It depicts the conversation after the photo—op. In it, Martin is talking while Malcolm listens intently. Ralph Abernathy is in the background and reporters are flanking the men. A sour faced policeman is in the foreground looking mad that he's there. What strikes me about the picture is how intimate my heroes look. I have no idea what Martin was saying or what Malcolm was thinking but the picture gives the sense that they understood more deeply than anyone else in that room how important this impromptu meeting was. It seems as if they are the only ones in the room and they are giving one another their full attention. They seem to know that time is short and this may be the only time they get to talk. History tells us that this was the only time that they met and it may have been the only time they ever spoke directly to one another. Less than a year later Malcolm was shot dead in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom, assassinated by the hands of Black men thought to be loyal to the Nation of Islam.

The Black Commentator – Malcolm and Martin: The Struggle Continues

The caption on the back of the postcard says that the meeting happened in Washington D.C. in 1964. Both men had been observing the Senate debate the Civil Rights Bill that would later be signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson. After the debate King addressed reporters in a nearby conference room and Malcolm sat in the back row of the room, I believe waiting. When Martin finished he left by one door and Malcolm left by another. In the hallway outside the men headed straight toward one another. Martin extended his hand and said, "Well, Malcolm, good to see you." Malcolm replied, "Good to see *you*," grinning the huge grin that few pictures depict but that his friends knew intimately.

This new photo captured my imagination and set it to spinning. Personally, I don't believe there was any apprehension in either man at the sight of the other. I believe that during the debate they both realized the presence of the other and they intended to take advantage of the opportunity to meet.

There was no ego involved, just one great soul seeking another for a moment of understanding. They understood one another on levels that few can fathom. They were brothers in spirit and cause, taking time to acknowledge one another. Although they never met again I am sure both were touched by the gravity of this meeting. Touched and encouraged. In fact they look as though they want more time to talk but know that they won't have it. So in this moment they are engaged in a discussion that involved more than words, it involved their souls.

As different as their approaches were to the struggles of Black people in America they were both dedicated to freedom, so dedicated that they gave their lives. They knew their deaths at the hands of assassins were probable but neither had any intention of stopping. They were both spiritual men destined to die for their causes, but at that moment they were friends that shared a love of their people. Though both were constantly surrounded by advisors, confidants and spies they walked the lonely road of sacrifice. They shared a burden of sincere leadership, uncompromising discipline and the dream of better days for all of us. In my mind's eye as I look at the postcard they are in communion; knowing that they weren't alone because they had each other. In that moment they were looking at mutual reflections giving both a living touchstone and reminder that their fight was larger than the accolades and the debates and the speeches. By looking at one another, touching one another and fellowshipping with one another they reaffirmed themselves and gathered strength.



check out our new
online store

[click here to shop](#)

What that picture shows me is that regardless of how extraordinary and brilliant these men were, they were just men. Men that needed encouragement and support from those who thought about, fought for and struggled for the same cause. When given the opportunity to reach out to one another they did and they were able to share a moment. Regardless of the presence of police, politics, reporters and picture men, that moment was private. To me the men are saying, "Stay strong brother, I've got your back. I will go where you can't go and say what you can't say and *we* shall overcome"

In 1964 the stakes were extremely high. Malcolm and Martin didn't see eye to eye about tactics to get our people free. But disagreement about approach did not make them disrespectful to one another as men. The picture shows obvious admiration and love, despite differences. This picture that my mother found doesn't just show two leaders meeting for the first time; it shows the best in humanity recognizing itself. How much we have lost.

These objectives of these two pathfinders were not completed. Martin's dream and Malcolm's vision could not be carried out completely because the dreamer and the visionary were struck down. They died laying the framework, and the question that remains is what we have done with it. For all intents and purposes Black people are free. The 800 pound albino gorilla of American society was blown off of the back of Black people through a century of struggle after emancipation. Malcolm and Martin embodied the tactics that got us

The Black Commentator – Malcolm and Martin: The Struggle Continues

through. They were the final champions of our people and they died looking forward at the problems that would plague us after we "overcame." Today the problems are here and we have no plan. Our so-called leaders are negotiating for reality shows and sit-coms or paying child support for illegitimate children. Our politicians either have nothing relevant to say or are co-opted and on the other side of freedom's fence sleeping with the enemy. Our children go under-educated; our families are broken with more than three quarters headed by single mothers and many of the men that should be fathering those families caught in a justice system not interested in rehabilitation, only punishment and imprisonment. Yet we spend our time in the community concerned with entertainers' personal conflicts and sexual escapades or dress codes for multimillion dollar athletes. We debate the presence of the word nigger in popular culture as though it's the problem and not a symptom of the sickness of our community. How much we have lost.

The truth of the picture my mother found is not that it shows brilliant heroes locked in philosophical debate or intrigue. It shows two men who did the best that they could with what they had. It shows men dedicated to principles meeting, and although they did not agree on the hows, they were very sure of the whats and that if they each did their part we all would be better for it. I keep that picture near my desk because I am only a man. I have few means but I can do what I can do and when I meet others doing what they can I will support them even if we don't agree. What will you do?

editorial voice of The St. Louis Argus, the oldest Black owned business in Missouri and one of the oldest African-American publications in the country. You can read more of his work at his weblog www.kingpenchronicles.blogspot.com.