

## **“The Ballot or the Bullet”: Malcolm X, April 3, 1964 (excerpts)**

. . . I’m not here to argue or discuss anything that we differ about, because it’s time for us to submerge our differences and realize that it is best for us to first see that we have the same problem, a common problem . . . We’re all in the same boat and we all are going to catch the same hell from the same man. He just happens to be a white man. All of us have suffered here, in this country, political oppression at the hands of the white man, economic exploitation at the hands of the white man, and social degradation at the hands of the white man.

Now in speaking like this, it doesn’t mean that we’re anti-white, but it does mean we’re anti-exploitation, we’re anti-degradation, we’re anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn’t want us to be anti-him, let him stop oppressing and exploiting and degrading us . . .

If we don’t do something real soon, I think you’ll have to agree that we’re going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It’s one or the other in 1964. It isn’t that time is running out—time has run out!

. . . I don’t even consider myself an American. If you and I were Americans, there’d be no problem. Those Honkies that just got off the boat, they’re already Americans; Polacks are already Americans; the Italian refugees are already Americans. Everything that came out of Europe, every blue-eyed thing, is already an American. And as long as you and I have been over here, we aren’t Americans yet.

Well, I am one who doesn’t believe in deluding myself. I’m not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn’t make you a diner, unless you eat some of what’s on that plate. Being here in America doesn’t make you an American. Being born here in America doesn’t make you an American. Why, if birth made you American, you wouldn’t need any legislation; you wouldn’t need any amendments to the Constitution; you wouldn’t be faced with civil-rights filibustering in Washington, D.C., right now. They don’t have to pass civil-rights legislation to make a Polack an American.

. . . I’m speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don’t see any American dream; I see an American nightmare . . .

So it’s time in 1964 to wake up . . . let them know your eyes are open too. It’s got to be the ballot or the bullet. The ballot or the bullet. If you’re afraid to use an expression like that, you should get on out of the country; you should get back in the cotton patch; you should get back in the alley . . .

And now you’re facing a situation where the young Negro’s coming up. They don’t want to hear that “turn the-other-cheek” stuff . . . There’s new thinking coming in. There’s new strategy

coming in. It'll be Molotov cocktails this month, hand grenades next month, and something else next month. It'll be ballots, or it'll be bullets. It'll be liberty, or it will be death . . .

If you don't take this kind of stand, your little children will grow up and look at you and think "shame." If you don't take an uncompromising stand, I don't mean go out and get violent; but at the same time you should never be nonviolent unless you run into some nonviolence. I'm nonviolent with those who are nonviolent with me. But when you drop that violence on me, then you've made me go insane, and I'm not responsible for what I do. And that's the way every Negro should get . . . This is what is meant by equality. What's good for the goose is good is good for the gander.

Uncle Sam's hands are dripping with blood, dripping with the blood of the black man in this country. He's the earth's number-one hypocrite . . .

Let the world know how bloody his hands are. Let the world know the hypocrisy that's practiced over here. Let it be the ballot or the bullet. Let him know that it must be the ballot or the bullet . . .

Source: Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," April 3, 1964, Cleveland, Ohio, from *Top 100 Speeches*, AmericanRhetoric.com.