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A Unique Voice

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Through its writing, delivery and timing, Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet," is a landmark speech for the civil rights movement and its cause. Its unique structure and message made Malcolm X stand out among other civil rights leaders at the time. By perfecting his connection with the audience, X manages to encourage the listeners to set aside all differences besides their common goal of equality. His use of emotional, logical, and ethical appeals brought together the African American community to stand up and fight whether through voting or violence. This mixture of passion, accessibility, and charisma that Malcolm X mastered, brought awareness and power to those he fought for.

Malcolm X was an African American nationalist and religious leader who fought for African American's and their injustices with racism and violence during the civil rights movement. During this period, in the 1950's and 1960's, African Americans were fighting for justice and equality as citizens of the United States. For roughly 350 years, African Americans were segregated, disenfranchised, and discriminated against by the white man and the United States government. This political movement saw the rise of many political advocate leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and the aforementioned, Malcolm X. X's methods were aggressive and straight-forward, often being seen as contentious which put him at odds with another non-violent activist, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. These tactics brought relatability and understanding to his writings and speeches, which is never more evident than in his speech "The Ballot or the Bullet." It was written in 1964, an election year, in strive to enlighten his listeners on the important political timing and consequences. The speech itself was delivered on

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two separate occasions. The first deliverance was on April 3, 1964 at the Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio and the second was on April 12, 1964 at the King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan. At these events, the audience was formed by African Americans and white Americans, both of which were the target of Malcolm X's speech.

In the speech, Malcolm X uses down-to-earth and relatable wording and phrasing to form a comfortability with him and his audience. By doing this, the audience does not see him as out of reach, but as one of them, a member of the same community who experiences the same problems. Using words and phrases such as, brothers and sisters, Dixiecrates, handkerchief-heads, dillydallying, and pussyfooting, he draws his audience in, in such a way that they do not see him as speaking down to them from a tall podium, but rather talking with them and discussing the issues they all face. This is also shown as he does not exclude any group, aside from civil right detractors, from his convictions. When speaking of religion, X (1964) states:

Although I'm still a Muslim, I'm not here tonight to discuss my religion. I'm not here to try and change your religion. 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, a problem that will make you catch hell whether you're a Baptist, or a Methodist, or a nationalist.

By saying this, he is conveying that they are all in the same boat, no matter religion, education, or residence. In his own words, X (1964) also states, "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." All of these literary tools utilized in crafting this speech, conveys his goal of unity through blandishment.

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By the same token, Malcolm X does not hold back his emotions when delivering the speech. This way of speaking and delivering provides a major opportunity to show the speaker's passion on these issues. His passion conveys how important this timing is for African American's and their rights with the election quickly approaching. This devoted way of speaking, that is littered throughout this speech, brings the feeling of unity amongst his audience, causing hope to be felt for a better future. He also uses a light-hearted tone in his voice to lift the spirits of his audience, regularly using humor and jokes. In the first introduction when Malcolm X is greeting his audience and constituents, X (1964) jokingly states "and I see some enemies." This one subtle word choice and delivery does three things right off the bat. Firstly, it lightens the mood that was most likely tense and heated. Secondly, it connects the speaker and audience, creating a relatable energy to Malcolm X's cause. Lastly, it sort of takes a jab at those he knows are fighting him and the goal of the civil rights movement. These ingenious little choices that are used throughout "The Ballot or the Bullet," convey the identity of both speaker and audience through agreement.

Malcolm X's distinct influence during the time of the civil rights movement, is no more apparent than in "The Ballot or the Bullet." X masters the perfect blend between literary writing, intentional delivery choices, and perfect political timing. As a result of its appeals to emotion, logic, and ethics, audiences felt the passion of this inspiring speech. It not only connected these people that shared the same injustice, but fueled the fire to make a difference. It is no wonder the affect it had on people, not only when delivered, but today as well.