

Necessary to Protect Ourselves

Interview with Malcolm X by Les Crane

Background – Malcolm X gave the following TV interview in 1964, at time when violence against civil rights workers had escalated. Shocking images of protestors being beaten, clubbed, and tear-gassed had become staples of daily news coverage. Across the South, white supremacists tried to squelch the growing movement with murder, rifle attacks, bombings, and arson, crimes that frequently went unpunished. As attacks increased, many African Americans grew impatient with King’s nonviolent tactics, expressing anger that chilled white listeners.

Events came to a head in 1964 with the Freedom Summer in Mississippi. Thousands of idealistic college students joined local civil rights activists in a massive voter registration drive, and violence exploded. Three young civil rights workers were murdered by local Klansmen with the help of the police. Despite increased FBI presence in the state, by summer’s end 4 workers were dead, 80 had been beaten, and scores of black churches and businesses had been torched or bombed.

Crane: You’ve been a critic of some of the Negro leadership in this country-- Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, Abernathy,¹ and others--have you changed in your feelings toward them of late?

Malcolm X: I think all of us should be critics of each other. Whenever you can’t stand criticism you can never grow. I don’t think that it serves any purpose for the leader of our people to waste their time fighting each other needlessly. I think that we accomplish more when we sit down in private and iron out whatever differences that may exist and try and then do something constructive for the benefit of our people. But on the other hand, I don’t think that we should be above criticism. I don’t think that anyone should be above criticism.

Crane: Violence or the threat of violence has always surrounded you. Speeches that you’ve made have been interpreted as being threats. You have made statements reported in the press about how the Negroes should go out and arm themselves, form militias of their own. I read a thing once, a statement I believe you made that every Negro should belong to the National Rifle Association.

Malcolm X: No, I said this: That in areas of this country where the government has proven its--either its inability or its unwillingness to protect the lives and property of our people, then it’s only fair to expect us to do whatever is necessary to protect ourselves. And in situations like Mississippi, places like Mississippi where the government actually has proven its inability to protect us and it has been proven that often times the police officers and sheriffs themselves are involved in the murder that takes place against our people then I feel, and I say that anywhere, that our people should start doing what is necessary to protect ourselves. This doesn’t mean that we should buy rifles and go out and initiate attacks indiscriminately against whites. But it does mean that we should get whatever is necessary to protect ourselves in a country or in an area where the governmental ability to protect us has broken down.

1. **Roy Wilkins, Abernathy:** Roy Wilkins (1901-1981) was executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1955-1977. Ralph Abernathy (1926-1990) helped Martin Luther King Jr. found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to combat racism.

Crane: Therefore you do not agree with Dr. King's Gandhian philosophy²

Malcolm X: My belief in brotherhood would never restrain me in any way from protecting myself in a society from a people whose disrespect for brotherhood makes them feel inclined to put my neck on a tree at the end of a rope.³ [*Applause*]

Crane: Well, it sounds as though you could be preaching a sort of an anarchy.

Malcolm X: No, no. I respect government and respect law. But does the government and the law respect us? If the FBI, which is what people depend upon a national scale to protect the morale and the property and the lives of the people, can't do so when the property and lives of Negroes and whites who try and help Negroes are concerned, then I think that it's only fair to expect elements to do whatever is necessary to protect themselves.

And this is no departure from normal procedure. Because right here in New York City you have vigilante committees⁴ that have been set up by groups who see where their neighborhood community is endangered and the law can't do anything about it. So-and even their lives aren't at stake. So--but the fear, Les, seems to come into existence only when someone says Negroes should form vigilante committees to protect their lives and their property.

I'm not advocating the breaking of any laws. But I say that our people will never be respected as human beings until we react as other normal, intelligent human beings do. And this country came into existence by people who were tired of tyranny and oppression and exploitation and the brutality that was being inflicted upon them by powers higher than they, and I think that it is only fair to expect us, sooner or later, to do likewise.

2. **Gandhian** (gän'de-ən) **philospophy:** Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) was an Indian nationalist and spiritual leader. His use of nonviolent civil disobedience forced the British to grant India its independence in 1947.

3. **put my neck...rope:** an allusion to lynching, the practice of putting someone to death without due process of law. Many African Americans were lynched, usually by hanging.

4. **vigilante** (vıgr'lænti) **committees:** volunteer citizen groups that unlawfully assume powers such as pursuing and punishing suspected criminals or offenders.