

## Malcolm X: All-American

**F**OR ALL BUT THE last two years of his adult life, Malcolm X held America in utter disdain. On one hand, he was utterly (and understandably) disgusted with the tolerance of racial segregation and violence against black Americans—including the reported lynching of at least 4,743 blacks between 1882 and 1968. But he also wrongly believed that America offered nothing good for anyone. Malcolm considered himself a black man of African descent who had the misfortune of being an American citizen. As he once declared: “Being born here in America doesn’t make you an American.”

Yet for all his agitation and vitriol against the American way of life, his own life story embodies the values and archetypes—from the bootstrapping self-made man of Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick* tales to the independent anti-hero of the Wild West—that our nation holds so dear. The man who disdained the United States so thoroughly was actually as American as apple pie. This is the not-so-easy lesson the reader gleans from *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, the last book written by the late Manning Marable, a Columbia University black studies guru who died just days before the book made it to press.

Malcolm X’s fiery, race-baiting rhetoric and revolutionary, ballot-or-bullet image belied his constantly changing ideology and his lean, occasionally emaciated, physique. He was philosophically promiscuous—constantly flirting with capitalism, Marxism, and Pan-Africanism—to the point of dilettantism. His three unflinching first principles—that all people have the right to liberty, that they

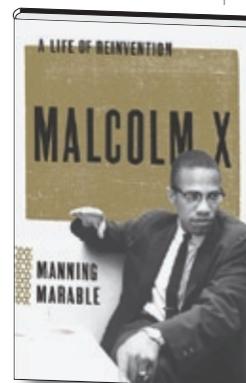
should use any means to get it, and that extremism in defense of freedom is no vice—is as appealing now to some movement conservatives and hard-core leftists

as it was in his lifetime to Black Panther members and campus radicals. He despised John F. Kennedy—and supported Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign. This makes his life and words an appeal-

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ing tool for polemicists of all stripes—including Mike Wallace, Spike Lee, and Shelby Steele—to champion their own causes and ideals.

In many ways, this was by Malcolm X’s design. Besides being a powerful orator, talented debater, and renowned charmer, Malcolm X was also an uncanny propagandist and mythologizer. As a minister of the infamous Nation of Islam, he exaggerated his criminal record (which largely consisted of petty cons and a minor string of home invasions) in order to prove how conversion to the cult could even help murderers change their lives for the better. Malcolm also teamed up with future *Roots* author Alex Haley on crafting an Augustinian-style confessional that would further exaggerate his criminal past and play down aspects of his life that didn’t neatly fit into the narrative.



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(After Malcolm’s death, Haley made Malcolm even more palatable for latte-leftist audiences by obscuring his anti-Semitism and presenting a story about his conversion from racial separatist to integrationist in the mode of Martin Luther King.) The result, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, is, for the most part, a fictional work with some facts weaved in to give it a patina of authenticity. It also became one of the biggest best-sellers of the late 20th century and a staple for unthinking wannabe revolutionaries on college campuses everywhere.

Malcolm X didn’t realize that he had embraced something that is possible only in America: the reinvention of one’s life story. Caste and class rules in the rest of the world keep people in their places. But as proved by William Penn, Davy Crockett, and countless others, America allows everyone the opportunity to recast himself on his own terms, reframe his

**Malcolm X:  
A Life of Reinvention**  
By Manning Marable  
(Viking, 608 pages, \$30)

**Reviewed by RiShawn Biddle**

successes and failures, and have second, third, or even fourth acts. In Malcolm X's case, however, as Marable reveals in this biography, mythmaking was unnecessary. Malcolm's emergence from poverty and small-time criminality to international prominence and infamy is amazing all on its own.

**T**HE OMAHA-BORN SON of devotees of early 20th-century civil rights activist and racial separatist Marcus Garvey, Malcolm fell into welfare, foster care, and aimlessness after his father's mysterious death and his mother's mental breakdown. By 1946, the 21-year-old Malcolm was roaming the streets of Boston and Harlem, barely subsisting on odd jobs at late-night jazz hangouts, peddling sandwiches to railroad passengers, serving as a butler (and occasional lover) to a wealthy hotel manager, and pulling off a string of small-time hustles. He would eventually be collared by Boston police for his role in orchestrating a string of home burglaries.

It was during that six-year prison stint that Malcolm turned his life around. Thanks to a fellow inmate, John Elton Bembry, Malcolm began a self-education that would include reading the works of Greek historian Herodotus and honing his debating skills over prison bull sessions; like fellow self-made men Ronald Reagan and Mark Twain, Malcolm would become an autodidact of the first order. Ashamed of how his waywardness and imprisonment brought embarrassment to his family, Malcolm became a brutal self-disciplinarian. From constant study to eating just one meal a day, he would thoroughly dedicate himself to bettering his life.

Through his brothers and sisters, he also became a devotee of the Nation of Islam, a bizarre sect that had emerged from the same climate of early 20th-century racialism and nativism that would spur the revival of the Ku Klux Klan. Led by a preacher's son-

turned-laborer, Elijah Muhammad, it pursued a dark, repugnant, and Manichean vision of race relations in America (including a willingness to collaborate with the Klan and the American Nazi Party). It also emphasized self-reliance, by-the-bootstraps entrepreneurship, personal temperance, and middle-class values—messages earlier advanced by Garvey, and before him, Booker T. Washington. Both messages made it appealing to black families, especially

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those who left the American South for northern cities during the Great Migration, who were tired of official and de facto Jim Crow segregation, and had learned all too well about the devastating consequences of the welfare state.

After leaving prison in 1952, Malcolm dedicated himself to expanding the reach of the Nation of Islam, and in the process took up itinerant preaching—a well-worn path to American success. Malcolm would become renowned for his long hours working the street corners of Detroit, Harlem, and Philadelphia and for his endless cross-country recruiting tours. Within 11 years, his evangelism expanded Nation membership from 1,200 members to 76,000 adherents (including legendary prizefighter Muhammad Ali and one of America's most virulent demagogues, Louis Farrakhan). By 1959, Malcolm had also emerged as a civil rights activist. His message of ending segregation "by whatever means necessary" proved to be a seductive foil to King's nonviolent activism. Malcolm would achieve fame and infamy, becoming a featured speaker on the college lecture and Sunday news show circuits.

But by 1964, Malcolm realized that the Nation of Islam's emphasis on racial separatism, along with the progress made on ending desegregation that started with the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, made it incapable of helping blacks become full members of the American mainstream. He realized that the only way blacks would be free is by the ballot, not the bullet. His own intellectual development, his embrace of Orthodox

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Islam, his realization that racism was a dead end, and his own outrage over Elijah Muhammad's blatant hypocrisy (including his constant philandering and gaggle of out-of-wedlock children) finally forced what would be a violent defection from the sect. Unbound by the constraints of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm could actually pursue his own course on his own terms, and take up the mantle of another American ideal: the independent man and thinker.

This autonomy came at great cost. He would spend the last year of his life dealing with death threats from his former comrades, investigations by the FBI and the New York Police Department's infamous BOSS surveillance unit, and constant begging for cash to support his growing family. Malcolm paid the ultimate price on a cold February day in 1965 when several members of the Nation of Islam shot him dead in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom.

**M**ARABLE'S EXHAUSTIVE BOOK clearly lays out Malcolm's flawed character and faulty thinking. He was a terrible politician and abysmal institutional leader. He was also an inattentive husband: his marriage to Betty Shabazz, often portrayed as romantic in films such as Lee's *Malcolm X*, was actually one of convenience and not affection. His penchant for race-baiting made it impossible for him to develop a cohesive political theory that advocated the liberty for black Americans he so wanted. And he continued to promote the impractical idea of blacks unifying alongside native *Africans* even after travels to places such as Liberia and Ghana made it clear that this was not possible.

But Malcolm's biggest flaw was that he could never realize that he was unfailingly and undeniably American and that only this nation could show the world how to form a more perfect social union. Unlike King, Malcolm never realized that the best of his ideals—from freedom to the end of racial segregation—are thoroughly weaved into the Constitution and the Bill of Rights (even if America took far too long to make it reality). This made it impossible for him to imagine a day when a black man like Barack Obama would occupy the White House, or think of an American culture dominated by hip-hop beats and the sounds of R&B. Or realize that his image and ideals, perceived and otherwise, have become embraced (and remixed) by a wide swath of Americans on all sides of the political aisle.

Whatever one thinks of Malcolm X, this much is clear: he's an American original. ❧

## The Ironic Chancellor

**I**T IS OFTEN SAID OF larger-than-life celebrities and politicians that they “suck the oxygen out of the room.” Otto von Bismarck went one step further: he sucked the air out of an entire nation. Granted, he had given it the breath of life in the first place, painstakingly forging a unified Germany out of a patchwork of 39 sovereign states with long and often hostile individual histories. Cunning, invincibly determined, undistracted by a larger ideology or moral imperative, and unburdened by political scruples of any kind, Bismarck succeeded in his monumental undertaking...but in the worst possible way. As the English historian Edward Crankshaw succinctly put it:

The tragedy of Bismarck, apart from the profound personal tragedy of a man of wonderful gifts corrupted, was not that he subordinated morality to the supposed needs of the state: most other statesmen of his time did that, including Gladstone. The tragedy was that he exalted the amoral concept of politics into a principle; and that, as a corollary, because he succeeded with such dazzling skill through the nine miraculous years which culminated in the foundation of the Reich, his countrymen surrendered to that principle.

Thus, Crankshaw concluded, “Bismarck and the [German] people corrupted each other.” Always projecting himself as a tower of strength, the so-called “Iron Chancellor” was actually more ironic than iron, a man of seemingly endless contradictions. Merciless to others, he drew on a bottomless well of self-pity when it came to his own real or imagined sufferings. Contemptuous of parliamentary government, he introduced universal manhood suffrage—“one man, one vote”—before most of the more progressive, democratic nations of Western Europe. The irony here lay in his reason for doing so: his deep-seated

### **Bismarck: A Life**

By Jonathan Steinberg  
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**Reviewed by  
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