

## COMMENTARY

# Malcolm X Hype Raises Questions



**Vernon Jarrett**

**T**he answer is: "Yes. I'll be there."

But the answer is "No" (in deuces) if I am asked to suggest that black adults take a day off from work and that black school-children stay out of school to see Spike Lee's cinematic treatment of Malcolm X.

I'll be there because over the past year I've witnessed the creation of a new black icon via Hollywood. Beginning tomorrow, Malcolm X will be stamped on the minds of millions of human beings as one of the two most important black individuals in American history. His heroism will become second, if not equal, to the monumental valor of the martyred Martin Luther King Jr. This is a phenomenal achievement.

Absolutely phenomenal. I gave myself this little quiz, based upon a question asked several months ago by retiring Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. During an interview, Justice Marshall asked a question of Malcolm worshippers:

*What did Malcolm ever do? Name one thing he ever did.*

So I engaged myself in a recapitulation of many of the historic confrontations engaged in by African Americans during my life. I listed the topics at random as they occurred to me. I asked, "*Where was Malcolm or what did he contribute?*"

- When blacks stood up to violent racist mobs as they moved out of Jim Crow ghettos and when blacks went to the high courts for the right to buy or rent wherever others could live, where was Malcolm?

Answer: I don't know.

- When blacks fought in the courts and on their jobs and picketed for job rights and fair employment practices, where was Malcolm?

A. I don't know.

- While blacks continually faced death by Southern lynch mobs and assassins' bullets whenever and wherever they demanded the right to register and vote. Did Malcolm risk his life alongside our lonely martyrs such as Medgar Evers?

A. I don't recall any such heroism.

- One of the greatest gains won by blacks in this century was the quest for political empowerment through passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1964. Was Malcolm one of the leaders of that struggle?

A. No.

- In 1954, the Supreme Court reversed the 58-year-old Plessy vs. Ferguson "separate-but-equal" ruling, finally ending legalized Jim Crow of public places such as schools, hospitals, parks, rest rooms, auditoriums, restaurants, railroads, buses, airlines, hotels, auditoriums. Was Malcolm a leader in that struggle?

A. No.

- When violent mobs confronted blacks seeking their rights under the law, was Malcolm on the front line in such bloody confrontations?

A. Not to my knowledge.

- Think of any instance when Malcolm actually mobilized blacks to defy racism or to draw the line on white violence.

A. I'm thinking hard.

- Was white America really afraid of Malcolm X? Really *afraid*?

A. I'm thinking hard.

I'm not about to deprecate the impact of Malcolm X. It is obvious that he did touch something inside the souls of thousands upon thousands of serious black people. But how does Hollywood rate him above some of the unquestionable giants of African American history? That's why I'm going to see Spike's movie.

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