

From chapter 7, "As Sure as God Made Green Apples"

Malcolm may have publicly commanded his followers to obey the law, but this did little to lessen suspicion of the Muslims by law enforcement in major cities. Nowhere did tensions run hotter than in Los Angeles, where Malcolm had established Temple No. 27 in 1957. For most whites who migrated to the city, Los Angeles was the quintessential city of dreams. For black migrants, the city of endless possibilities offered some of the same Jim Crow restrictions they had sought to escape by moving west. As early as 1915, black Los Angeles residents were protesting against racially restrictive housing covenants; such racial covenants as well as blatant discrimination by

real estate firms continued to be a problem well into the 1960s. The real growth of the black community in Southern California only began to take place during the two decades after 1945. During this twenty-year period, when the black population of New York City increased by nearly 250 percent, the black population of Los Angeles jumped 800 percent. Blacks were also increasingly important in local trade unions, and in the economy generally. For example, between 1940 and 1960, the percentage of black males in LA working as factory operatives increased from 15 percent to 24 percent; the proportion of African-American men employed in crafts during the same period rose from 7 percent to 14 percent. By 1960, 468,000 blacks resided in Los Angeles County, approximately 20 percent of the county's population.

These were some of the reasons that Malcolm had invested so much energy and effort to build the NOI's presence in Southern California, and especially the development of Mosque No. 27. Having recruited the mosque's leaders, he flew out to settle a local factional dispute in October

1961. Such activities were noticed and monitored by the California Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, which feared that the NOI had "Communist affiliations." The state committee concluded that there was an "interesting parallel between the Negro Muslim movement and the Communist Party, and that is the advocacy of the overthrow of a hated regime by force, violence or any other means." On September 2, 1961, several Muslims selling

Muhammad Speaks in a South Central Los Angeles grocery store parking lot were harassed by two white store detectives. The detectives later claimed that when they had attempted to stop the Muslims from selling the paper, they were "stomped and beaten." The version of

this incident described in *Muhammad Speaks* was strikingly different, with the paper claiming that "the two 'detectives' produced guns, and attempted to make a 'citizen's arrest.' Grocery packers rushed out to help the detectives . . . and black residents of the area who had gathered also

became involved. For 45 minutes bedlam reigned." About forty Los Angeles Police Department officers were dispatched to the scene to restore order. Five Muslims were arrested. At their subsequent trial, the store's owner and manager confirmed that the NOI had been given permission to peddle their newspapers in the parking lot. An all-white jury acquitted the Muslims on all charges.

Following the parking lot mêlée, the LAPD was primed for retaliation against the local NOI. The city's police commissioner, William H. Parker, had even read Lincoln's *The Black Muslims in America*, and viewed the sect as subversive and dangerous, capable of producing widespread unrest. He instructed his officers to closely monitor the mosque's activities, which is why, just after midnight on April 27, 1962, when two officers observed what looked to them like men taking clothes out of the back of a car outside the mosque, they approached with suspicion. What happened next is a matter of dispute, yet whether the police were jumped, as they claimed,

or the Muslim men were shoved and beaten without provocation, as seems likely, the commotion brought a stream of angry Muslims out of the mosque. The police threatened to respond with deadly force, but when one officer attempted to intimidate the growing crowd of bystanders, he was disarmed by the crowd. Somehow one officer's revolver went off, shooting

and wounding his partner in the elbow. Backup squad cars soon arrived ferrying more than seventy officers, and a full-scale battle ensued. Within minutes dozens of cops raided the mosque itself, randomly beating NOI members. It took fifteen minutes for the fighting to die down. In the end, seven Muslims were shot, including NOI member William X Rogers, who was shot in the back and paralyzed for life. NOI officer Ronald Stokes, a Korean War veteran, had attempted to surrender to the police by raising his hands over his head. Police responded by shooting him from the rear; a bullet pierced his heart, killing him. A coroner's inquest determined that Stokes's death was "justifiable." A number of Muslims were indicted.

News of the raid shattered Malcolm; he wept for the reliable and trustworthy Stokes, whom he had known well from his many trips to the West Coast. The desecration of the mosque and the violence brought upon its members pushed Malcolm to a dark place. He was finally ready for the

Nation to throw a punch. Malcolm told Mosque No. 7's Fruit of Islam that the time had come for retribution, an eye for an eye, and he began to recruit members for an assassination team to target LAPD officers. Charles 37X, who attended one of these meetings, recalled him in a rage, shouting to the assembled Fruit, "What are you here for? What the *hell* are you here for?" As Louis Farrakhan related, "Brother Malcolm had a gangsterlike past. And coming into the Nation, and especially in New York, he had a tremendous sway over men that came out of the street with gangster leanings." It was especially from these hardened men that Malcolm demanded action, and they rose to his cry. Mosque No. 7 intended to "send somebody to Los Angeles to kill [the police] as sure as God made green apples," said James 67X. "Brothers volunteered for it."

As he made plans to bring his killers to Los Angeles, Malcolm sought the approval of Elijah Muhammad, in what he assumed would be a formality. The time had come for action, and surely Muhammad would see the necessity in summoning the Nation's strength for the battle. But the Messenger denied him. "Brother, you don't go to war over a provocation," he told Malcolm. "They could kill a few of my followers, but I'm not going to go out and do something silly." He ordered the entire FOI to stand down. Malcolm was stunned; he acquiesced, but with bitter disappointment. Farrakhan believes Malcolm concluded that Muhammad was trying "to protect the wealth that he had acquired, rather than go out with the struggle of our people."

A few days later Malcolm flew to Los Angeles, and on May 4 he held a press conference about the shootings at the Statler Hilton. The next day he presided over Stokes's funeral. More than two thousand people attended the service, and an estimated one thousand joined in the automobile procession to the cemetery. Yet the matter was far from resolved. If Malcolm could not kill the officers involved, he was determined that both the police and the political establishment in Los Angeles should be forced to acknowledge their responsibility. The only way to accomplish this, he believed, was for the NOI to work with civil rights organizations, local black politicians, and religious groups. On May 20, Malcolm participated in a major rally against police brutality that attracted the support of many white liberals, as well as communists. "You're brutalized because you're black," he declared at the demonstration. "And when they lay a club on the side of your head, they do not ask your religion. You're black—that's enough."

He threw himself into organizing a black united front against the police in Southern California, but once more Elijah Muhammad stepped in, ordering his stubborn lieutenant to halt all efforts. "Brother, stay where I put you," ran his edict, "because they [civil rights organizations] have no place to go. Hold your position." Muhammad was convinced that integration could not be achieved; the civil rights groups would ultimately gravitate toward the Nation of Islam. When desegregation failed, he explained to Malcolm (and later to Farrakhan), "they will have no place to

go but what you and I represent.” Consequently, he vetoed any cooperation with civil rights groups even on a matter as contentious as Stokes’s murder. Louis X saw this as an important turning point in the deteriorating relationship between Malcolm and Muhammad. By 1962, Malcolm was “speaking less and less about the teachings [of Muhammad],” recalled Farrakhan. “And he was fascinated by the civil rights movement, the action of the civil rights participants, and the lack of action of the followers of the Honorable Elijah.”

At heart, the disagreement between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad went deeper than the practical question of how to respond to the Los Angeles police assault. Almost from the moment Muhammad had been informed about the raid and Stokes’s death, he viewed the tragedy as stemming from a lack of courage by Mosque No. 27’s members. “Every one of the Muslims

should have died,” he was reported to have said, “before they allowed an aggressor to come into their mosque.” Muhammad believed Stokes had died from weakness, because he had attempted to surrender to the police. Malcolm could hardly stomach such an idea, but having submitted to the Messenger’s authority, he repeated the arguments as his own inside Mosque No. 7. James 67X listened as Malcolm told the congregation, “We are not Christian(s). We are not to turn the other cheek, but the laborers [NOI members] have gotten so comfortable that in dealing with the devil they will submit to him. . . . If a blow is struck against you, fight back.” The brothers in the Los Angeles mosque who resisted had lived. Ronald Stokes submitted and was killed.

Some of Malcolm’s closest associates were persuaded that Elijah Muhammad had made the correct decision, at least on the issue of retaliation. Benjamin 2X Goodman, for one, would later declare, “Mr. Muhammad said, ‘All in good time’ . . . and he was right. The police were ready. It would have been a trap.” But Malcolm himself was humiliated by the NOI’s failure to defend its own members. Everything that he had experienced over the previous years—from mobilizing thousands in the streets around Hinton’s beating in 1957 to working with Philip Randolph to build a local black united front in 1961–62—told him that the Nation could protect its members only through joint action with civil rights organizations and other religious groups. One could not simply leave everything to Allah.

The Stokes murder brought to a close the first phase of Malcolm’s career within the NOI. He had become convinced that Elijah Muhammad’s passive position could not be justified. Malcolm had spent almost a decade in the Nation, and for all his speeches, he could point to no progress on the creation of a separate black state. Meanwhile, in the state that existed, the black men and women who looked to him for leadership were suffering and dying. Political agitation and public protests, along the lines of CORE and SNCC, were essential to challenging institutional racism. Malcolm hoped that, at least within the confines of Mosque No. 7, he would be allowed to pursue a more aggressive strategy, in concert with independent black leaders like Powell and Randolph. In doing so, he speculated, perhaps the entire Nation of Islam could be reborn.