

“The Ballot or the Bullet”: A speech delivered by Malcolm X (April 4, 1964)

1 Mr. Moderator, Reverend Cleag, Brother Lomax, brothers and sisters, and friends and I see some
2 enemies. This afternoon we want to talk about the ballot or the bullet. The ballot or the bullet explains
3 itself. (...) So we're trapped, trapped, double-trapped, triple-trapped. Anywhere we go we find that we'
4 re trapped. And every kind of solution that someone comes up with is just another trap. And once you
5 can create some employment in the community where you live it will eliminate the necessity of you and
6 me having to act ignorantly and disgracefully, boycotting and picketing some practice some place else
7 trying to beg him for a job. Anytime you have to rely upon your enemy for a job - you're in bad shape.
8 When you have - he is your enemy. Let me tell you, you wouldn't be in this country if some enemy
9 hadn't kidnapped you and brought you here. They don't hang you because you're a Baptist; they hang
10 you 'cause you're black. They don't attack me because I'm a Muslim; they attack me 'cause I'm black(
11 ...)We suffer political oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation - all of them from the
12 same enemy. (...) And 1964 looks like it might be the year of the ballot or the bullet. Why does it look
13 like it might be the year of the ballot or the bullet? Because Negroes have listened to the trickery, and
14 the lies, and the false promises of the white man now for too long. And they're fed up. They've become
15 disenchanted. They've become disillusioned. They've become dissatisfied, and all of this has built up
16 frustrations in the black community (...) Whenever you got a racial powder keg sitting in your lap,
17 you're in more trouble than if you had an atomic powder keg sitting in your lap. (...) Understand this,
18 it's dangerous. And in 1964 this seems to be the year, because what can the white man use now to fool
19 us after he put down that march on Washington? (...) He tricked you, had you marching down to
20 Washington. Yes, had you marching back and forth between the feet of a dead man named Lincoln and
21 another dead man named George Washington singing "We Shall Overcome". (...) He made a fool out
22 of you. (...)So today, our people are disillusioned. They've become disenchanted. (...)I'm not even a
23 student of politics. I'm not a Republican, nor a Democrat, nor an American, and got sense enough to
24 know it. I'm one of the 22 million black victims of the Democrats, one of the 22 million black victims
25 of the Republicans, and one of the 22 million black victims of Americanism. And when I speak, I don't
26 speak as a Democrat, or a Republican, *nor an American*. I speak as a victim of America's so-called
27 democracy. You and I have never seen democracy; all we've seen is hypocrisy. When we open our eyes
28 today and look around America, we see America not through the eyes of someone who has enjoyed the
29 fruits of Americanism, we see America through the eyes of someone who has been the victim of
30 Americanism. We don't see any American dream; we've experienced only the American nightmare. We
31 haven't benefited from America's democracy; we've only suffered from America's hypocrisy. And the
32 generation that's coming up now can see it and are not afraid to say it. If you go to jail, so what? If you
33 're black, you were born in jail. (...) You're in a position to determine who will go to the White House,
34 and who will stay in the doghouse. You got a President who's nothing but a Southern segregationist
35 from the state of Texas. They'll lynch you in Texas as quickly as they'll lynch you in Mississippi. Only
36 in Texas they lynch you with a Texas accent; in Mississippi they lynch you with a Mississippi accent. (
37 ...) It'll be the ballot or it'll be the bullet. It'll be liberty or it'll be death. And if you're not ready to pay
38 that price don't use the word freedom in your vocabulary. (...).

Toolbox :

A trap : a device for taking game or other animals; *especially* : one that holds by springing shut suddenly.

To hang somebody : to suspend by the neck until dead.

Trickery : the practice of crafty underhanded ingenuity to deceive or cheat.

To be fed up with something : tired, sated, or disgusted beyond endurance.

Powder keg : a small usually metal cask for holding gunpowder or blasting powder.

