

# Questions remain 60 years later about death of Malcolm X

NYPD, feds face recent lawsuits over killing

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USA TODAY

On Feb. 21, Ilyasah Shabazz returned to the site of a national tragedy: the place where civil rights icon Malcolm X was gunned down in front of his pregnant wife and young children.

For Shabazz, the tragedy is a deeply personal one. She thinks often about how her mother watched 21 bullets rip through the body of the love of her life and the great pains she took to keep his presence alive for Shabazz and her five sisters.

"My mother kept pictures, paintings of him everywhere in our house. I vividly recall his hat, his shoes, his coat, his briefcase, his books," she told USA TODAY. "And so we knew daddy, and she kept conversations of him pretty frequent."

Shabazz said her late mother "turned a place that represented tragedy into a place of triumph" by establishing the Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center in New York City, where family members, advocates and officials commemorated the 60th anniversary of Malcolm X's assassination Friday — an annual tradition Shabazz has participated in for as long as she can remember. The center, where Shabazz serves on the board of directors, also honored five new leaders who embody her father's resilience and dedication to social justice, including U.S. Rep. Jasmine Crockett and Palestinian-American activist Linda Sarsour, Shabazz said.

As state and federal officials continue to restrict lessons about and curb celebrations of Black history, Shabazz said learning about the contributions her father made is as important as ever, adding that "our education is not complete." Shabazz said it's also crucial to get answers to the questions still swirling about his death, a mystery that gained renewed attention after the discovery of new evidence. Two men wrongfully accused of his murder were cleared and multimillion-dollar lawsuits were filed accusing the U.S. government of being involved.

"First of all, it would be good to know what happened, who killed him, why he was killed, and correct our history books, because it's not accurate," Shabazz said.

## How Malcolm X became 'hero' of Black America

Joanna Leflore-Ejike said she was a child when she first learned the teachings of Malcolm X, who was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925.

Her mother had a copy of his autobiography on her bookshelf, which she later gave to Leflore-Ejike, and would take her to events put on by the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation at his birthplace in Omaha, Nebraska.

"He was what Ossie Davis coined at his home-going service, 'our Black shining prince,'" Leflore-Ejike, now the foundation's executive director, told USA TODAY. "He inspired a new generation of leaders through not only self-sufficiency, Black empowerment, but civic engagement, aligning ourselves with our cultural heritage."

"To us, he was our hero and still is," she later added.

What Leflore-Ejike tries to emphasize through her work at the foundation is the many evolutions Malcolm X underwent as he sought the liberation of African Americans.

Malcolm X converted to the Nation of Islam, began educating himself and was "utterly transformed" while he was in prison for robbery from 1946 to 1952, historian David Garrow said. After his release, he became an advocate for Black



As a child, JoAnna Leflore-Ejike, executive director of the Malcolm X Foundation, went with her mother to events put on by the foundation in Omaha, Neb. CODY SCANLAN/DES MOINES REGISTER

and Muslim communities and a fiery, outspoken leader in the Civil Rights Movement who urged Black people to claim their civil rights "by any means necessary."

But Malcolm X became disillusioned with the Nation of Islam and his separation from the group after a trip to Mecca drew animosity from members and leadership, Garrow said. Malcolm X is often portrayed as a controversial figure in contrast to leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who preached nonviolence, but Garrow said he also began speaking about racial unity, rather than separatism, near the end of his life.

"Had Malcolm not been killed in February '65, they, sooner rather than later, would have been working in tandem," Garrow told USA TODAY. "I think that that is understood or appreciated only by a tiny community of scholars."

Malcolm X's assassination may have been more consequential to the movement than King's, and on par with the losses of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and his brother Robert F. Kennedy in 1968, Garrow said, because he was just beginning to reach the height of his national influence and standing on the precipice of achieving immense political power. "So the loss of Malcolm is, to my mind, a tragedy on a JFK, RFK scale," Garrow said.

Though Malcolm X's potential was recognized by his peers like King, Garrow said, white Americans largely disregarded his influence, in part because of his connection to the Nation of Islam. A New York Times report on his killing said his life was "strangely and pitifully wasted," while Time called him "an unashamed demagogue" who preached hatred and violence.

But over the years, multiple books, including "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," written with famed author Alex Haley, and Spike Lee's 1992 biopic, which features Denzel Washington in the title role, helped cement a different view in America's collective consciousness.

His name now graces streets, parks, schools and universities, and Malcolm X Day is celebrated in more than a dozen states, including Nebraska, which inducted Malcolm X into its hall of fame in 2024. And decades after his death, his legacy has continued to inspire a generation of Black leaders, from former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick to former President Barack Obama to civil rights attorney Ben Crump.

"Malcolm X, I believe, was one of the greatest thought leaders of the 20th century. ... Malcolm remains to me to be a voice of conscience as we fight against the intellectual justification of discrimination that exists in the United States of America," Crump said.

Though doubts about who is responsible for Malcolm X's assassination have existed since he was fatally shot at Man-

hattan's Audubon Ballroom on Feb. 21, 1965, a Netflix docuseries and new evidence have brought renewed scrutiny to the case.

In 2021, former Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr. vacated the convictions of two of the men jailed for Malcolm X's murder, Muhammad Aziz and the late Khalil Islam, after a nearly two-year investigation unearthed fresh evidence of witness intimidation and suppression of evidence. The city and state of New York later agreed to pay \$36 million to settle lawsuits filed on behalf of the men, and Vance apologized for law enforcement's "serious, unacceptable violations of law and the public trust."

Crump and fellow civil rights attorney Flint Taylor filed a \$100 million lawsuit in November accusing the New York Police Department, Department of Justice, FBI, and CIA of failing to prevent Malcolm X's assassination and hiding their involvement for decades. Aziz and Islam's estate have also separately sued in federal court, accusing the FBI of hiding exculpatory evidence.

Taylor said their suit is still in its early stages and his team is pushing the city to turn over evidence from the wrongful conviction investigation. He said the family wants an apology and complete public reckoning of what happened to the civil rights icon.

"It's a suit that raises questions well beyond the civil rights violations, constitutional violations, because it's a human rights case. ... There is a moral and political obligation on behalf of the city of New York and the federal government with their roles not only to admit to their roles after all these years, but to make reparations," Taylor said.

Garrow, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, said the threats against Malcolm X's life were well-known, but it's not clear whether the FBI's high-level informants in Chicago relayed information about the plot clearly to their handlers. Though the NYPD was also likely surveilling Black radicals, Garrow, a former professor of law and history at the University of Pittsburgh, said he "could not be more dubious" of allegations the department was complicit in the assassination, adding that the far-reaching lawsuit has "so much faulty, conspiratorial garbage."

As the legal battle to uncover the truth continues, Crump wants the Trump administration to declassify government documents related to the assassination, just as the president directed for the killings of King and the Kennedy brothers.

"We think that Malcolm X's FBI files are more relevant now than ever on the 60th anniversary of his death," Crump said.

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