

THE BLACK MUSLIMS

Muhammad's empire is heading for oblivion

By William Worthy
Second of two articles

WHETHER ELIJAH MUHAMMAD is at his Chicago headquarters or his winter home in Phoenix, Ariz., the movement's orders originate with the seemingly meek and humble 67-year-old native of Sandersville, Ga. At the Harlem Armory in June the white WNEW radio reporter with whom I was working was surprised that this frail son of a sharecropping Baptist minister is not a dynamic speaker. Nevertheless, from his opening "Peace Be With You" greeting, always spoken in Arabic, until his concluding remarks hours later, he electrifies the ranks with every sentence. In intuitively grasping the emotional ingredients of leadership, Muhammad has not at all been handicapped by his limited education, aborted at the fourth grade. In two lengthy conversations with him, I came to realize that he could easily have written a paragraph in General De Gaulle's essay on leaders:

"There can be no prestige without mystery. In the designs, the demeanor and the mental operations of a leader, there must always be a 'something' which others cannot altogether fathom, which puzzles them, stirs them and rivets their attention."

ESPECIALLY WHEN HE wears a pillbox turban for public occasions Muhammad seems to have a touch of the patient Oriental in his face. In my research and in contacts with many of the men around him, no evidence of insincerity has ever come my way. "Elijah is devout and believes his religious experiences are real," a somewhat critical acolyte once told me.

"He believes in his theology and has tremendous faith in himself and Allah. It's that faith that keeps him going. But I'm not sure I'd say he's fanatical. He trusts us subordinates to a degree. Essentially he thinks no one is his friend. The 'royal family' and no outsiders are going to run the Nation," the functionary remarked a full four years before the split with Malcolm.

"Elijah can't see any good in white

stopped by competent lawyers, he successfully practiced legal brinkmanship from every platform, to the frenzied delight of his audiences. They invariably got the message, even as he carefully refrained from the specific language that might put him back in prison for "incitement" or "advocacy."

Despite his semantic skill, Muhammad perhaps feared he was on a collision course with federal officials who have clearly shown, in the case of James Hoffa, they can "get" anyone. Or perhaps he was subtly and unconsciously overtaken by the natural conservatism that sets in when a movement reaches a certain level of influence and financial "success."

Whatever the explanation for the change in direction—I've heard one sympathetic critic hypothesize that the implications and logical next steps of the Black Revolution became too much for a man of Elijah's background to cope with—the Muslims have lost much of their power to inspire the new generation of politicalized black revolutionaries. One of the leaders of this upcoming crop of leaders, 22-year-old Max Stanford, wrote recently:

"The Black Muslims have not only proved to be conservative, but sometimes reactionary. Though they have a beautiful line on the struggle, their inability to be flexible may lead to their own downfall. Thus, their leader's recent contradiction of his own principles [apparently a reference to Elijah's patriotic-sounding repudiation of Malcolm's widely quoted statement on President Kennedy's assassination] has set the stage for their downfall or retrogression into the category of a small religious sect.

"A typical outlook towards the Muslims now can be expressed in a statement by a young freedom fighter in a nonviolent action group. When asked what she thought of the possibility of the Muslims being violent, she said: 'They are more nonviolent than we are.' The Muslims' inability to move will soon prove to lead to their destruction. Now that we have reached that stage in the struggle where



BLACK MUSLIM LEADER ELIJAH MUHAMMAD SPEAKING AT A RALLY
His words are tough, but many of his followers want action too

colm down to size.")

On the night Malcolm announced the split, I interviewed the almost unbelieving Muhammad for radio. He reiterated his reversion to an emphasis on religion and spirituality. "There is no political or secular solution to racial strife," he maintained. Given this direction of the last several years, many observers and Muslim fellow-travelers had anticipated that Malcolm would before long "outgrow" the movement that had nurtured him. But the specific incident that triggered the final break came shortly after the Kennedy assassination. At a New York mass rally, Malcolm reviewed the long record of violence against Negroes in 1963, declared that President Kennedy had not used his powers to halt the attacks, referred to the CIA-instigated, officially sanctioned murder of the Diem and Nhu brothers three weeks earlier in South Vietnam, and then spoke of "chickens coming home to roost" in Dallas.

BY HIS CHOICE of words for the public rebuke to Malcolm, Muhammad forfeited whatever support he still retained among black revolutionaries. The shocked consensus was that the statement was Uncle Tomish in tone, specifically in his unprecedented reverent reference to "our" President. Many were inclined to concede that Malcolm had exceeded the bounds of good taste by speaking as he did during the month of national mourning. But they also felt that Muhammad was now clearly on an accommodation course with the whites he had so long challenged, and that his disciplinary silencing of Malcolm "indefinitely" was unwarranted, even as a public relations gesture.

However long the Muslims may continue to attract a measure of attention, I personally believe that, with his statement, Muhammad signed the movement's death warrant as a community force to be reckoned with. Only the unlikely accession of a new Messenger of Allah, attuned to today's political realities and linked at least informally with all the world's have-nots, would lead to a modification of this prophecy.

IT IS NOT TOO MUCH to say that the roof has begun to cave in at the movement's headquarters. Not generally known is the power reportedly exercised by a highly placed black FBI agent in Chicago. Recently he has managed to divide Elijah's own family over the secret finances and to sow dissension in virtually all the mosques. Last fall, after long having heard about the agent's activities from very authoritative sources, I asked one of Elijah's sons if the family was unaware of what was going on. The son went no further than to say that they too were aware of the reports and that the man would be wise to "flee the country permanently" if ever they got proof. Outside observers conclude that the agent, whose strategic position on the movement's payroll enables him to know everything, "must have something on someone" in order to stay around with impunity.

At the beginning of 1962, in a New York debate with Malcolm, Bayard Rustin put his finger on the Muslim blind alley that is now visible even to uncritical support-

ers. He struck at the Muslims' separatist approach and termed it "emotionalism in the place of concrete next steps, a whipping boy in the place of program."

UNQUESTIONABLY IT HAS been the unprecedented candor and forcefulness of the Muslim social analysis that catapulted both Malcolm and Muhammad into their high place of respect and affection among countless Negroes. Every two weeks the well-edited, highly informative Muslim newspaper has been eagerly awaited, almost as a Bible, by its 400,000 purchasers. At the same time, the members and admirers waited endlessly for the promised acts of leadership needed to implement the demands.

As far back as 1961 in Havana, Robert F. Williams, exiled president of the Monroe, N.C., NAACP, indicated that Muhammad had almost run his course. "Mr. Muhammad," he observed, "is training his followers in unity and discipline. That's all to the good. But many of the Muslims are looking for immediate revolutionary guidance even if they never use the word revolution. One day some other leader will come along and say 'Let's go!' At that point many of the militants will desert to another banner."

In a not unfriendly article in *Liberator* magazine last year a writer warned that unless Muhammad quickly translated militant-sounding words into effective action, people would soon be asking: "Whatever happened to the Muslims?"

IN 1960 I WAS TOLD in Chicago by a teacher at the Muslim parochial school: "Elijah doesn't want the movement to die with him." Malcolm's breakaway in March was the first outward sign of serious internal disintegration. Another blow this year was the filing of two paternity suits against Muhammad by a pair of young former secretaries. The New York Times has reported that one son, Wallace, withdrew subsequently from the movement, charging his father with immorality and religious deception and accusing the movement of political ineffectiveness. From Cairo in August, United Press International reported that another son, Akbar, long a student at one of the Islamic universities, had followed in Wallace's steps (*Times*, Aug. 18, 1964).

Added to Muhammad's extreme bitterness toward Malcolm is his comment to the press that "other messengers, like Moses and King David, have had troubles with their sons." It is widely known that, in contrast with his own youthful poverty, "the old man" has showered material benefits on his offspring.

Without Elijah Poole of Sandersville, Ga.—the man who became Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam—the Black Revolution would not be at its present stage; his contribution is undeniable. Whether or not his own tightly held branch of that broad struggle withers and dies as soon as the aging asthma victim passes from the scene, I feel that the Messenger of Allah will die in tragic personal isolation from the ongoing battle between human man and anti-human man—a disappointed, abandoned, heartbroken figure.

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people and sincerely hates them," he continued. "His federal prison experience as a draft resister made him bitter. Earlier, in the South and also in Washington, D.C., he was kicked around by the police on vagrancy charges. He had a tough time economically. In recent years he has been known to complain that one son is lazy and dependent on him. This son wanted a Cadillac instead of the Pontiac he then owned. Elijah objected, but gave it to him anyway."

UNTIL ABOUT 1962, those with trained ears—including the FBI agents who covered all his rallies—assessed Muhammad as a revolutionary. Without the intellectual brilliance shown by Malcolm, he nevertheless analyzed the Negro's plight in much the same terms and clearly understood the concept of revolution. Back-

our children are murdered and leaders assassinated (Medgar Evers, not Kennedy!), the question comes: 'Where do we go from here?'"

IN ANSWER TO THAT question Malcolm last spring came up with a political, international and anti-colonial program that has since been reinforced by two important, symbolic trips to Africa. He both spoke out and broke out on March 8 after a long period of uneasy relations with the royal family, some of whom seemed more or less openly motivated by personal jealousy. (Since the problem of succession is a live issue in the movement's top echelon, the popular threat that Malcolm posed to ambitious sons and sons-in-law unquestionably explained the pressures on Muhammad to "cut Mal-