First Person

The Price of Freedom

Herman Ferguson

The Editors

Even before Malcolm X had broken from the Nation of Islam on March 8, 1964, he had begun to attract a significant number of strong and dedicated supporters who were not Muslims. Prominent within this group was Herman Ferguson, a young African-American educator and assistant principal in the New York Public Schools system. In late 1963, Ferguson and others organized a public lecture for Malcolm X in his Queens neighborhood. Ferguson was a founding member of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), and was active in promoting its educational programs. Ferguson was an eyewitness to Malcolm X's assassination on February 21, 1965, at the Audubon Ballroom. He was interviewed on July 24, 2004 by Professor Manning Marable, former Souls *managing editor Cheryll Y. Greene, and Columbia University history doctoral student Russell Rickford.*

SOULS: Talk about the first time you heard Malcolm X speak or heard about him. What were people saying about him?

Herman Ferguson: It would be difficult to recall when I first heard about Malcolm because, if you recall, there was a time when Malcolm was speaking throughout the Harlem on the street corners and in front of the mosque on 116th Street. He was in the newspapers and was therefore known throughout the Black communities—he and the Nation of Islam. The Nation's newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, was well known in the Black community. So I doubt if any person back there in that period wasn't aware of the Nation of Islam.

SOULS: Did you read *Muhammad Speaks* and what were your general impressions before you met Malcolm about the Nation of Islam?

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HF: I felt that the Nation of Islam was an organization that was set up by Black people for Black people and concerned itself with the problems in the Black community. I was not that familiar with or that concerned with their religious program because, by that time, I had come to the conclusion that one of the problems in the Black community that was restricting our progress and forward movement was the Christian religion. Although the Nation of Islam did not profess the Christian religion, I felt that most religions tended to impede and control the progressive movement of people. So, other than the religious part of the problem, I felt that their political and economic program was exactly suited for our problems in the Black community.

SOULS: Tell us about the kinds of concerns and activism you had around education and the struggle for quality education for African-American children in 1962 and how that struggle led up to the beginnings of your relationship to Malcolm X.

HF: After the end of World War II, I went back to school and earned my master's degree in education administration at New York University. I then began to take the city exams for a position in the New York City school system. Although I had suspected this, after teaching in the school system, I soon found out that Brown v. Board of Education was not worth the paper it was written on and that, the problems of Black kids in the school system, even here in New York City, were appalling.

These kids were being destroyed and I felt that there must be something that I can do. That's what inspired me to begin to study to move to higher levels in the school system. I felt I might be a little more effective.

SOULS: You attended the March on Washington in 1963 as part of your involvement and activism, in general. Did you see Malcolm at the march?

HF: No, I did not see him at the march. I'd heard that he was there but didn't see him.

SOULS: In the fall of 1963, can you account for Malcolm and what was the Nation of Islam's involvement in your effort to gain the hiring of the Black construction workers in Rockville Centre, Queens?

HF: In 1963, in Rockville Centre they had begun to construct a housing complex that would eventually turn out to be the second largest condominium housing development in the United States. We observed, in the Queens community, around the area they had taken over—the old Jamaica race track—that they had started construction, but were not hiring any Black workers.

You would pass by this construction site and see cars and trucks from all over the United States, many of them from the South—Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia—with all white workers in them. At some point, some of the civil rights organizations in the area became aware of this. The Jamaica-Long Island Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Jamaica NAACP, and the Men of Steel Alliance came together and formed a group.

They went to the construction people and told them to hire Black workers. The response was "No." At the same time, there were also construction problems at Downstate, the hospital in Brooklyn. Additionally, Harlem Hospital had been singled out for its policy of not having Black workers.

So, it was logical for these groups in Queens to take that approach. I remember clearly, and this is when I first saw Malcolm close up, but didn't get to speak to him. It was the last Sunday in June of 1963. There was a rally called in a food market. And all of

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the national civil rights leaders were there. Malcolm came in the lot while the rally was going on. He had not been invited but when he walked in he stood out like a light. Everybody knew him because we had seen him often on the television and we'd seen his pictures in the papers. Malcolm was physically imposing. He was very tall and well-built. And when he walked in, he had one of his bodyguards, a towering guy even taller than Malcolm.

Everybody's eyes were on Malcolm. The crowd sort of forgot the civil rights leaders on the platform and moved over towards Malcolm. I just wanted to stand by him, I didn't want to meet him or anything but just to stand by him. I'd seen this man on television. I'd read about him in the newspapers and I was just impressed with the things that he had to say. He was so different from the other leaders in the Black community that I just felt like this is a man I had wanted to know.

I remember my wife woke me up one night and said, you know the demonstrations are at Rockville and it's all in the papers and on the radio, Why don't you go on over there? You've been talking so much about discrimination; put your money where your mouth is. That's what she said to me, sort of daring me to go ahead and get involved. Reluctantly, I rolled out of bed, went over to the demonstrations, and became a part of the Rockville Movement. I joined the picket line.

However, what struck me as being very strange and unsettling was that they had hundreds of people out there—a very good turnout, women and the children—locking hands to form human chains in front of these construction trucks, the cement trucks. But the truck drivers were rolling right through the lines and ignoring the people. They broke them up and the police were arresting people. The leaders of the demonstration were not doing anything.

That's when I began to question what was happening. I became part of that line because I felt that the people needed to be awakened to how you really conduct a demonstration and a picket line to get your demands. I found out that an arrangement had been made with the police to arrest the people, take them quickly to the courthouse where a special judge would hear the cases, fine them five dollars and release you so that you could go back to the picket lines. This was something that I felt was not right. I felt there must be other people on that line who thought the way I thought. I said, well, I'm going to try and find some of these people and we're going to make changes here. That's what we did and, as a result, we managed to, in a sense, take over the Rockville Movement.

After we came back from the March on Washington, we moved and expanded our demonstration to take on Jamaica Avenue which was a shopping hub in the predominantly Black south Jamaica section of Queens. There was a big wave of Black people moving into that area from Bed-Stuy, in Brooklyn, from Harlem, from the South Bronx. They were buying homes for the first time.

As we surveyed what was happening on Jamaica Avenue, we saw there were no Black people working as clerks in any of the stores. All the major department stores—Macy's, Gertz's—had locations, major outlets on Jamaica Avenue, but no Black people were being hired. And we started our demonstration, which was kind of different. We would go at night and have what we called silent candlelight demonstrations. We would carry candles and we'd dress in black and we'd light those candles and we'd just march around and around in front of these buildings and we would go from one to the other and demonstrate from about six or seven o'clock until the stores closed. This drew the attention of the police, but there was nothing that they could do to get us because we weren't breaking any laws.

Through the work that we were doing there, we had support from the Nation of Islam brothers in Queens. Most of those brothers we knew. Many of them I had taught in school. They were friends; we knew each other. They had seen us demonstrating, but couldn't

become involved because they were not allowed to get involved in anything political. But they could sell their newspapers and we worked out an agreement with them that they would sell their newspapers around where we held our demonstrations or where there'd be a lot of people. We would give them our fliers and they would put our fliers in their newspapers, so when you bought a newspaper you would get our flier and *Muhammad Speaks.*

SOULS: Did Malcolm know that you were slipping fliers into *Muhammad Speaks*, or did he simply just look the other way? This was occurring at a mosque in Queens?

HF: No. They did not have a mosque in Queens, at that time. This was Mosque Number Seven.

SOULS: Number Seven?

HF: Yes. My theory is that Malcolm certainly would have encouraged them to support us. And I know that he did because the brother who was in charge of the Queens area was called Brother Larry, Larry Ford, or something like that. He would go back and tell Brother Malcolm what we were doing. And Malcolm said, "Well, that's good," and would send back messages encouraging us to continue our struggle because we were struggling for jobs for Black people and that you know, fit into the things that he stood for. So, through Brother Larry, Malcolm was sending word to us that we were doing a good job and he eventually invited us to come to the mosque. Brother Larry took us to the mosque one Sunday and we sat in the mosque and heard Malcolm speak. Following the speech, he would stay a while on this stage and people from the audience could walk over meet him—shake his hand and speak with him. Malcolm was very congenial, very friendly, and would spend an inordinate amount of time with people who were there speaking with him.

We asked Larry to invite Malcolm out to Jamaica to see our demonstrations around Jamaica Savings Bank, which was the major bank that controlled and owned the mortgages for all of the Black homes in that whole area of Queens. The bank put up a mural around the walls, showing the historical development of Queens and Long Island and it showed all of the various things that were part of the development of Queens, including industry and education. The only thing they showed to represent Black people was a wooly-headed, white-haired old man, in short pants, no shoes on his feet, his foot up on the stump of a tree, playing a banjo. Standing around him was a group of white children. In the background there was a big plantation with a white house in front. This was obviously the master's home. Removing the mural became the focus of our efforts. We were going to just bring that murderer off the wall. So, we got a lot of publicity around "Banjo Billy." However, because the bank was privately owned by a family, we did not have the kind of effect that we would have had had it been a publicly owned bank.

SOULS: This was 1963, so Malcolm was still in the Nation and there was still the policy of non-involvement in political struggle. Did you have a sense that Malcolm was contacting local groups all over?

HF: I knew that Malcolm was doing a lot of proselytizing for the Nation of Islam; he called it fishing. Wherever there were Black people, he went there. He went to the bars, the barbershops, and the street corners. So, I'm sure that wherever there were organizations that were receptive to him, he would go and speak to them. I mean, he would be invited by some of the more progressive organizations to speak.

SOULS: Did you have the sense that he was doing this in a way that was beyond the Nation of Islam's teachings?

HF: Oh, I see what you're saying. No, I don't think Malcolm had any intention of leaving the Nation. I think what he intended to do was to bring people into the Nation and to develop a kind of a relationship where people would think favorably of the Nation and would then be prepared to come into the Nation of Islam. A lot of the people who Malcolm brought into the Nation came from the Black churches.

SOULS: Do you think that the kind of relationship he had with you and other leaders was indicative of where he was moving strategically at that point in late '63?

HF: I think you're right about that. I'm sure that he was. Whenever Black people were trying to do something for themselves, Malcolm wanted to be there and to be a part of it. And I think that was part of the dissatisfaction that was beginning to eat at him more and more as far as the policies of the Nation of Islam. When the police began to move on certain mosques and began to put pressure on the Nation of Islam, Malcolm couldn't understand why Elijah Muhammad would not allow them to strike back.

SOULS: At the end of November 1963, Malcolm gives a brilliant and well received address. The NOI was working in a supporting capacity to help build the movement in Queens. This is highly unusual because, in many ways, it's a violation of the line of the NOI. Can you respond to that?

HF: There was a development that took place over a period of time. I felt that eventually Malcolm would have to leave the Nation of Islam. He was too political. He was developing too fast for them. And he was too much involved with the problems of the Black community.

SOULS: Tell us the substance of Malcolm's requests of you and some of your Black colleagues in the school district to help him develop curriculum for Temple Seven?

HF: As I recall, Malcolm called me and told me one day he wanted to develop a Black curriculum for the school at Mosque Number Seven. But he wanted to make sure if it was educationally sound and he felt that I could help him. He wanted me to approach other Black educators to come together and sort of like give them some sense of direction.

I said to him, "Well, certainly, brother, I don't have any problems, but you too have to do this. And I think it can be very good." I moved and began contacting people who I knew who were working for the Board of Education. Mainly I contacted the handful of Black supervisors and administrators who were currently working for the Board of Education. I was startled by the response that I got. Everybody talked about how horrible the schools were. And I guess being naive I thought that when you reached the level that I had reached at the Board of Education where you were in a position to change something that's what you would do. You would be committed to that. I couldn't see being committed to anything else but that. But these people were not concerned about it. They were concerned about promotions. They were concerned about their pensions. They were concerned about anything besides the fact that we were helping to destroy Black kids. Not only Black kids but white kids too.

SOULS: And how did you come to be a member of the Muslim Mosque, Incorporated?

HF: Malcolm announced that he was starting this new organization and I signed up; I told him that I was going to join. In the discussions we had we talked about whether or not my membership should be known publicly. Malcolm was interested in the fact that I had a high position—at the time, I was an assistant principal in an elementary school in Queens. I made no bones about the fact that I was an admirer of Malcolm. I felt that he had the correct solution to our problems as Black people here in the United States and that was my leader. Some of the people in the school I was in, some of the other assistant principals, were pro Adam Clayton Powell. They would say, "Why don't you follow Adam Clayton Powell?"

I would say, "No. Malcolm is the man," you know? So I was not hiding my politics, so it didn't really make that much difference to me whether it was announced publicly or whatever, but Malcolm felt that I should keep it quiet.

I felt that Malcolm belonged to the people in a secular sense rather than in a religious sense. There were many Black people who were not pro Nation of Islam for many reasons. Many of them were afraid of the Nation of Islam. The emphasis on the Fruit of Islam, the apparent military nature of the organization, the searching of people when they came into the meetings, separation of the men and the women, and all of those kinds of things that would tend to make Black people a little leery, a little nervous. So I felt that if Malcolm could strip his religion, put it on the side, and present his politics minus the religious side of it, that that would remove a lot of the concerns that many Black people had about the Nation of Islam.

I felt that he had a lot to offer from his own perspective, rather than always paying homage to Elijah Muhammad—"Elijah Muhammad tells us" and that sort of thing. It sort of got to be a little—what do I want to say?—like the bell on the ice cream trucks. That's your mind, that's you, that's not Elijah Muhammad. Elijah Muhammad doesn't have that kind of insight. He may have the insight and he had a good mind, a keen mind, but he just wasn't a public speaker. I heard him try to speak, and was very unimpressed. He just didn't cut the mustard.

So I felt that Malcolm would become his own man—and I saw him in leaving the Nation of Islam Malcolm—become his own man. So basically what I'm saying is that I wasn't shocked, as I recall, I wasn't taken aback. I didn't feel that this would be a terrible loss. I knew that Malcolm would need to build a base of support. I assumed that he had it, you know. But then I discovered by working with the Organization for Afro-American Unity, that our people, while they would come out to the rallies when they knew Malcolm was going to be speaking, but they didn't join up in the large numbers that we had anticipated and had hoped would come forward and get involved.

One of the reasons we decided to form these different committees in various areas was so that people could join a specific committee: the education committee, the cultural committee, the communications committee. Wherever their interest or expertise lay, they could join that particular committee and work in that area. But all of the committees had the same problem of the lack of large numbers of people coming forward to join. We would have people come to some of our meetings, which were open meetings, and yet some of these people were not even members.

Malcolm was aware of the fact that we were having problems, and from time to time he would mention in his speeches the fact that the organization was open for membership and he would list the requirements.We always had a table there where people could sign up and get a membership card. As I recall, it was one or two dollars to join, a very, very small amount of money. So the membership fee was no object.

SOULS: People have said that Malcolm didn't want people to be part of both organizations. In a general way, nearly all Muslim Mosque, Inc. people were former Muslims and

that the Organization of Afro-American Unity people were nearly all people who had never been in the NOI. Were you a part of both organizations?

HF: Yes. I was a part of both organizations. I recall there were other people who also had that same status. I think one of the reasons that he started the OAAU was that while he was overseas he kept getting reports of problems that were happening.

The former Nation of Islam brothers refused to work with the women. They were concerned about the fact that many of us had not come in through the Nation of Islam period. And they felt that they had sort of a controlling interest in Malcolm. Malcolm was theirs and they resented the outsiders who were trying to influence Malcolm.

SOULS: This is the summer of 1964. Malcolm is back from the Hajj and he's back for about seven weeks or so. There are already tensions between MMI and OAAU about where this thing is going. And that's the question I'm asking you.

That August, Malcolm writes a letter back to the States on his second trip, really talking substantively about the problems within OAAU and MMI, and about brothers threatening to quit, resign and leave. We're trying to figure out, from your point of view, your perspective, what was occurring during those early months when you were trying to build this thing, and how did people interact with each other when Malcolm wasn't around?

HF: It was after the OAAU came into existence that I think the problems began to arise around the role of the females. Some of the brothers were very concerned about Malcolm's relationship with certain specific females—not in the sense that Malcolm was having any affairs or anything of that sort, but these brothers had been trained to believe that women played a secondary role to the men. The men were out front; the protectors, the warriors, etc. And Malcolm felt that the women had equal position with the men. As a matter of fact, there were women that Malcolm, I believe, felt deserved appointments to higher positions, ones that he would not have put any of the men in.

As a matter of fact, a couple of brothers came to me and said that because the minister had a lot of respect for me, they wanted me to approach him about their concerns about the role of the women and how it was not sitting well with many of the brothers. So I said, "Well, why don't you all—why me?" They said, "No, he won't listen to us. He'll listen to you, though."

SOULS: Do you remember who came to you?

HF: Sure. Specifically, one brother Earl Grant. I don't know if he would admit that, and that's why I was asking you if you had talked with him.

Anyway, he came to me and was speaking on behalf of some of the brothers who had observed that Malcolm was placing too much confidence and responsibility in the women, and they felt that it was harming the organization. But I knew the position of the Nation of Islam and those people who were from it. You know, I didn't find that particularly alarming or disturbing. But I did say to him, "Well, why don't you all go and tell him?" They knew Malcolm would eat their heads off. He didn't take any nonsense from those guys.

So I guess they figured that Malcolm might listen to me. But I didn't do it. I didn't have any problem with that. I felt it was what should be done, and as a matter of fact, the women that Malcolm seemed to place a lot of confidence in were responsible, they were well educated, and I felt that his respect for them and the responsibility that he placed in them was the correct thing to do. So after a time Muslim Mosque, Inc. and the OAAU sort of like drifted apart. Some people came in and were not part of the MMI, and all of the MMI people were not part of OAAU. So there was that gap there. And I think that

Malcolm saw the MMI as—what should I say—his mosque. Maybe I should say it that way. This is where the religious part of the program and his activities would be centered. But the OAAU would be a more secular-type organization. It was not based on religion and it was based on politics and economics and so on.

As a matter of fact, at one of our meetings, I remember him speaking very forcefully and directly to this whole concept of the separation of religion from politics, and the example he used, as he stood there in front of us, was, "If you have your politics in your hands and your religion, you have them there in your hand now. When you're dealing with things that are religious in nature and you put the politics in your pocket," and he closed his hand and put his hand in his jacket pocket, like this, and he said, "When you're dealing with things that are religious, you put the politics in your pocket and you deal with your religion."

In other words, he was making the point that there should be a separation and you should be able to separate the two, and that religion—you did your prayers, you spoke with your god in the closet or somewhere else; you separated the two. You didn't try to mix them. I think the point he was trying to resolve was that problem that he knew we were having between those two forces.

SOULS: How effective do you think he was in putting that philosophy into practice in his administration of the OAAU and MMI? I guess this is a question that gets back to Malcolm's demeanor and manner. Was he, in your mind, with OAAU, exclusively a political leader, a political figure, or were there times when the roles overlapped and he did do the kind of ministering, almost pastoring, that one would expect of a religious figure?

HF: I saw Malcolm as a political figure who had a deep-seated belief in Allah, his god, and his religion—totally committed—but had the ability to separate one out from the other. He could be political without being like a Baptist preacher. I could appreciate that in him because I had no particular commitment to any kind of religion. I felt that religion was—even the Muslim religion—operated as kind of a break from the things that we as Black people knew to really liberate ourselves. And I felt that Malcolm had this uncanny ability to remove from his political activities his religion and that he could accept people if they were of the Muslim faith, if they were Baptists or Methodists. He was serious and sincere when he talked about those things, about the fact that we were not punished or treated the way we were treated in America because we were Muslim, because we were Baptists, or Methodists, or Catholic, or whatever; we were treated that way because we were Black and in America.

And that's why I respected the man so; because he was sincere. I never ever observed him say or do anything that caused me to question his beliefs. I felt that here was a man who was ready to go to the end of the line, to walk that last mile in support of the things that he believed in. There would be nothing that would cause him to change his thinking. And this is where I have had my problems with those people who have tried to rewrite or change history in terms of his thinking about who our enemy was.

Malcolm didn't change his ideas one iota, not one bit about who the enemy was. He knew it was the white man. He knew the white man had all the power and he was using it against us. He didn't equivocate that by saying, "Well, there are a handful of whites that are [good]." Malcolm used to say when you'd mention to him that some white person or some white dude had done something on the behalf of Black people, "Well, it's just a case of the devil doing some good." He said, "Sometimes the devil does good." That's what he used to say to us.

SOULS: All right. Now, let me raise this question, because this always comes up on

Malcolm and especially, in part, because of Alex Haley. Malcolm is meeting with Haley all throughout 1963. Nobody hardly knows about this. Haley rarely shows up at the mosque, only occasionally. Then he moves to Rome, New York in October of 1963, and he's up there writing and he stays in contact by telephone, occasionally meeting with Malcolm at Idlewild.

Haley would lead us to believe that when Malcolm went to Mecca in April of 1964 and came back, that he had seen this vision of multiracial humankind, that with the power of Allah and through faith, white people would overcome their racism. And so if you could bring that kind of power of faith to the U.S., it was possible for white people to be transformed. Part of what Haley implies is—well, Haley doesn't say Malcolm became an integrationist; I'm not putting words in Haley's mouth, but others who have read Haley argue exactly that. And in fact, when they had the postage stamp of Malcolm back in 1998, the description of Malcolm that was released by the U.S. Postal Service says that he moved after Mecca into an integrationist frame of mind. What's your view about this since you knew the man when he came back from the Hajj?

Now, there's another thing to think about. When Malcolm sent these letters back from Mecca, from Saudi Arabia, James Shabazz put the letter in his pocket for a couple of days. He was very upset about it, he didn't want people to see it, he didn't know what to do, and it was only after several days that he released it. So clearly Shabazz is saying to us that what Malcolm is saying seems to be a departure to him; otherwise, why did he hold the letter? So we're looking to you to help us straighten this out.

HF: As I recall, when Malcolm came back, he told us his experiences in great detail. When I say we, I'm talking about the members of the OAAU. After he described his experience meeting a Muslim who was also a revolutionary, and the man saying to him, "I'm white, so therefore you don't include me in your struggle," and Malcolm had to think about that sort of thing. He realized—he accepted that, yes, he had been excluding some people based on the fact that he had said that all white people are the devil.

He also said that maybe if the white man in America could embrace Islam he could change his feelings and actions toward Black people. This is where I think that Alex Haley stops. But Malcolm went on and said to us, "But we know the white man cannot accept Islam or any religion that will cause him to see us in a favorable light." He said, "That's impossible." Because if I had for a moment even suspected that Malcolm was changing his thinking, I would have walked away. He was a true intellectual and he liked to think aloud and work through problems—intellectual problems—and then come up with his conclusion. Because he would sometimes do this people would think that he was going through a period of uncertainties, when he was in fact only verbalizing a kind of a contradictory thought that he might have been having and trying to take a position on.

But finally, when Malcolm had resolved the matter and come up with his own interpretation and his thinking on the matter, that was it. After he went through that intellectual process and weighed the pros against the cons and finally decided what was the solution to the problem, and I've seen him do that on many occasions when he would think, "Well, we can do it this way or we could do it that way, but then if we do it this way, we'll run into this problem down the road." He works his way through the problem and comes up with what he thinks is the right solution.

So he, in my opinion, had offered to white people the possibility of Islam correcting their sense of values and their opinions and their actions towards white people, but he was of the opinion that they could never accept the teachings of Islam. The white man, the European, could never accept those teachings.

SOULS: So you don't think it was a political stretch?

HF: No.

SOULS: You don't think Malcolm was trying to signal, for instance, to a larger Black audience that he had made a clear intellectual break from the dogma of the Nation?

HF: Right. Or say a break from Yacub, that literally the white man is a devil. One argument that people make is that if one reads—and in fact, the Socialist Workers Party argued that if you look at the text, the context of what Malcolm's speeches were in November and December of 1964, and in the first months of 1965, he actually stops using the term "Black Nationalist" or "Black Nationalism" and says at one point that he was searching for another word—some of us would say Pan-Africanism—that more closely or accurately spoke to the kind of revolutions that were occurring in the Black world and a kind of way of speaking about [Black political organization] that Black Nationalism didn't quite fit that category. You have yourself asked, if you look to Black nationalism as your central politics, how do you then deal with the Algerian revolution, or the Vietnamese revolution, people of color fighting against French and then U.S. imperialism? We know that Malcolm was dead set against Vietnam. It comes out through all those speeches. So how does the Black Nationalist actually speak to those kinds of things?

My feeling was that Malcolm, in searching for a position that would replace the term Black Nationalism, would have eventually wound up embracing socialism. Because of the kind of mind that he had, he would have been led to embracing socialism as an economic vehicle for Black Nationalism. I think he recognized—there's no question about it—he recognized the shortcomings of Black Nationalism. So many Nationalists don't have a clear understanding of what that means.

SOULS: What was the problem with recruiting? Why weren't more people coming?

HF: That's a good question. It has many facets to it. We have to look at the time that all of this was going on. There was a lot of turmoil and uncertainty and suspicion. The counterintelligence program, which we, at that time, although we were victims of it and target because they hadn't begun yet to really to victimize anybody, we didn't understand what was going on. We were very naÔve about that. We had infiltrators whose job was to create dissention, to start rumors, so there were a lot of rumors going on, a lot of rumor mongering going on.

SOULS: What kinds of rumors?

HF: This person is an agent, or that person doesn't like the minister, certain people are having affairs with each other. I don't think there was ever an organized outreach approach to the general population to bring in members. We talked about it. We tended to rely mainly on Malcolm's popularity and the fact that people knew Malcolm and respected him. We sort of hoped he would be like the magnet that would draw the people in. It didn't really work.

As I said, people would come out in large numbers to the rallies that we had, but when it came to the actual joining of the organization, that was a commitment that you had to think about, because immediately when you became a known member of Malcolm's organization, I mean, you stood out like a sore thumb. You could be a Panther, you know. It was easier to be a Black Panther than to be a Malcolmite.

SOULS: So in your mind it was the fear of being associated with the militancy of Malcolm, less so perhaps the aura of, for instance, the fear of the Nation of Islam and the concern

over the animosity between Malcolm's people and the Nation of Islam. That was secondary to the outright fear?

HF: I think that's all part of the mix. I was going to come to that because Malcolm addressed that issue when he said early on that there would be no searching of people. He said that was too much of a reminder of what it was like in the Nation of Islam. So we were copying from the Nation of Islam, and he didn't want that. He felt that it showed that we didn't feel safe around the general public. We wanted the public to feel that this was a different type of organization. It's not a carbon copy of the Nation of Islam, so, no searching.

Then he ruled that there would be no weapons displayed at the meetings, because that was also playing into the hands of the media and those people who stamped him as being a militant. He felt that that might ease our problems in terms of bringing in other people, ordinary people, to join the organization.

So I think that was all part of the thing that we had against us. And try as we might, you know, we did not resolve that problem. Now, had Malcolm lived long enough, there were a lot of problems that Malcolm would have eventually resolved, he would have worked out of that, around that, but he didn't get the chance to do it.

So when I say that there were a mix of things—I mean that you have to look at the environment at that time and the fact that there were many Negro organizations opposed to Malcolm and what he stood for: the NAACP, the Urban League, the SCLC, King and his organization. They were always saying, "You better deal with us or you got that guy over there." You know, they were saying, not only to black people, they were saying it to white people as well, particularly to the white power structure: "Deal with us. Send us the money. We know what to do with it and we'll keep everybody quiet. That guy, you know, you can't trust him."

SOULS: I'm interested, very interested, in this episode where Earl Grant approaches you and tries to prevail upon you to go to Malcolm over the woman question, and get some sort of resolution of that. I'm interested, obviously, because of the kind of chauvinism that it represents coming out of the old guard within Malcolm's camp, but also because this really indicates that—and in your mind, in your memory, this is at what point in 1964? Is this relatively early after the OAAU has been formed?

HF: Yes.

SOULS: Okay. So to me this indicates that it's clear to Earl Grant and some of the other kind of old-guard brothers that Malcolm is trying to move beyond the kind of politics, the kind of limited politics, that they—

HF: They feel they are losing their influence.

SOULS: And so that gets to the critical question I have about Malcolm and where he's trying to go in 1964 and his cadre, because I've had this theory that Malcolm is really trying to move beyond the old guard that came out of the Nation with him, and he's really investing in the OAAU, he's investing in the independent—

HF: Yes, hold that for a minute and I'll tell you an instance that will support what you're saying there. One Saturday before the Liberation School had gone into session—Malcolm used to come there. He had his office right there, and he had this partition, and he used to go behind that and sort of remain sort of secluded while he was doing his work. But one

day he was out there, and there were some brothers just sitting around, lounging around, nothing to do.

And Malcolm said, "This is all we got." That's all he said: "This is all we got," which would indicate that he realized the limitations of the brothers. They were loyal to him, they were completely faithful to him, would lay down their lives for him, and he knew that, there was no question about it, but in terms of building a revolution, their roles were limited to the military side of things. But in terms of building and developing and bringing people into the organization, they would tend to frighten people away.

That same morning, I remember he said to this brother, "Don't you have anything to do? Just hanging around? Go out and deliver some leaflets." He gave us some flyers. "Go out there and give out some flyers." The guy left and we didn't see him for several weeks. And then when we saw him next he was all bandaged up. He went down in the subway, and Nation of Islam guys jumped him, and put him in the hospital.

SOULS: Was it your sense that strategically Malcolm was privileging people like you? Was Malcolm counting on young people, educated people with nationalist leanings to form the corp of his political thrust in 1964 and beyond?

HF: I have thought about that in terms of DuBois' talented tenth. Maybe this is what Malcolm had in mind; I don't know. But I do know on one occasion Malcolm was sitting around in our office and there were some brothers who had come out of the Nation. These were brothers who Malcolm had literally picked up, shown them the light, and politicized.These were some of his most loyal brothers. And I remember somebody saying to Malcolm, you going to start a revolution with these people? And Malcolm said, "That's all we got." I remember that clearly. And I thought that Malcolm felt that if one Black person's going to be free, all Black people have to be free. And there's no such thing as a class—in that point and time he was not looking at class within the Black community.

Although, I do believe that he was quite conscious of the class contradictions in the Black community. If you go back to his speech where he talks about the field hand and the house slave—that was the breakdown of the class contradictions in our society. Of course, Malcolm boasted that he was a field Negro.

SOULS: Did you think in the OAAU Malcolm was trying to attract more educated people so he could reach civil rights groups and the kind of people who were involved in building a united front? Do you understand my question?

HF: I understand clearly. Yes. I remember at our meetings when we first started the OAAU during the question and answer period Malcolm would make a pitch on how to join the organization. He would specifically call on people with skills. "We need engineers. We need doctors. We need lawyers." The kind of people you're talking about. Now, about what his ultimate aim was I can't say because I never talked to him about it.

But I do believe that he felt that for the OAAU to really be able to develop its aims and objectives you needed talented, educated people with a nationalist bent. I really believe that's what he had in mind.

SOULS: Do you know of any efforts in 1964–65 that Malcolm made to reach out to King?

HF: I know that when Malcolm came back from the second trip to Africa he talked about the OAAU being a sort of a blanket type of organization that other organizations could

come under. The OAAU could be responsible then for taking the question of the violation of the human rights of Black people before the United Nations. He apologized for being so hard on civil rights leaders to some extent. He was very much aware of what was going on in the South. He'd say he often felt like taking a plane and going down to Alabama or Mississippi and getting off the plane with a shotgun and saying this is the answer. Some of us would laugh but Malcolm was serious. He was aware of what was happening. He was aware of the problems that the civil rights workers were having in the South. He felt sympathy for them and felt that their intentions were good but he felt that that was not the answer to the problem.

SOULS: Did you sense from members of the OAAU or the old guard MMI brothers and the Black community at large, a growing discontent with Malcolm's new willingness to interface with the civil rights mainstream?

HF: No, I don't think so. Those of us who worked with Malcolm, and who had been with him were convinced of his commitment to his beliefs. I don't believe that anyone in the inner core doubted for a moment. I think it's important that organizations like mine—the Malcolm X Commemoration Committee—and other organizations in the New African Independence movement counteract all of the propaganda that's been spread about Malcolm. Some of the organizations, particularly my own, came into existence around the fact that Malcolm was being glamorized and sanitized. Madison Avenue got into the picture and they were selling all kinds of party things. Sneakers were being produced with the X on it. And, when it really reached the peak of ridiculousness—they even had condoms with the X on it. So, those of us who had known Malcolm felt that we needed to come together and fight this trend.

SOULS: Talk about Malcolm's efforts at the OAAU conference in Cairo in 1964 and how he came home feeling it had been a major victory.

HF: We came back to Cairo, as I recall, just pleased with the fact that Malcolm had been so well received. He had had audiences with leaders of various countries. He had spoken on behalf of Black people and from his letter that he would send giving us reports on what was happening with him, you know, we felt that he was making progress. He was moving forward. He always talked about the fact that we all were brothers and sisters, "I don't see myself as being Malcolm X. I'm representing you. I'm you. You, it's the same as you are there through me." This is the kind of thing that kept us fired up and true believers.

SOULS: While in Africa Malcolm asks for the support of African leaders and by doing this, in essence, becomes more dangerous in the eyes of the government. Did you and he have a sense of this at the OAAU?

HF: I guess. As a matter of fact, an undercover agent had been exposed. And in one particular case the brothers went to Malcolm and wanted to take some action to expose the brother and publicize the fact that he was an undercover agent. Malcolm's position was to leave him there because if we expose him they just have to take him out and replace him with some else. But we won't know who the new one is. We know who this bird is so we can do some counterintelligence, you know, send some wrong information to the FBI.

One of the things that I think about as I look back on that period is that, in retrospect, the whole movement was guilty of not understanding that the United States government

was at war with the Black community. We didn't understand it and, I think, that as a result of that, we did not expect such a thing as COINTELPRO. I only heard about COINTELPRO after I had been a victim of it.

I did not even know that there were conspiracy laws in New York State going back to 1896. They pulled it out from under the rug. They hadn't used it in ages and ages. So, it was like almost adventurism because of the fact that we did not understand the type of opposition we were up against or how far they were prepared to go; they would cheat us just like they would cheat a foreign government if they had were at war with them.

We didn't pick up on the signs that we should have picked up on. We had no counter-intelligence program. We had nothing like that in place and as a result, like cannon fodder people sat around and talked about the danger that Malcolm was in. It was just like, "The brother should be more careful." He should have somebody with him at all times. Somebody should speak to him about driving his own cars. Some of the other brothers were concerned after some incident happened at his home. The brothers stayed overnight with a couple of groups, but it was just a reaction. It was not a planned kind of security thing whereby the enemy would understand that if you moved on Malcolm you would have his security to deal with.

SOULS: Trace the evolution of Malcolm's recognition of the conspiracy against his life.

HF: To my knowledge, I never heard him speak other than in just broad terms about the conspiracy. Because, I think, we all knew what was happening to Black people and he always talked about the government being involved in the problems that we were having. This was why he wanted to take the government before the United Nations and charge them with the violation of the human rights of Black people. This was, you know, part of the broad plan, but in terms of his own security and addressing the threats to his life, I have a feeling that he didn't really spend too much time dealing with that—you know, that the government was going to kill him. It may have crossed his mind, but when he went to France and was not allowed in the country, whatever possible thoughts he may have been having regarding whether the CIA was out to kill him, I think they crystallized out of the experience when he was not allowed to enter France. After France he said to us that he had made a mistake. He said that he always assumed that his problems were coming out of Chicago [and the Nation], but, they're not.

He said they're coming from Washington. He went on to say that while the Nation of Islam had a lot of influence they have no influence on any government. They cannot influence a government to not allow me to enter their country. He also said the Nation of Islam does not attack women and children. The Nation would not have burned my house with my wife and children in that house. That was the government. Malcolm came back from the first trip overseas shortly after the uprising in Harlem had taken place. During the time when the people were in the streets, young people were rebelling throwing rocks and things. Young people were jumping up on cars and chanting, "We want Malcolm! Bring Malcolm!" I spoke to Malcolm often and said to him they were calling his name. He said, some people have called in and said that I should be there. But he said he would never start a riot. But he would never *stop* one, so my fear was that it was good that he didn't come.

SOULS: Talk about February 21st and the things that stand out in your mind.

HF: On that Sunday afternoon I arrived early. It was my custom. I think it was around two o'clock. As I turned into 166th Street off Broadway, on the left hand side, just across

from the entrance to the Audubon Ballroom is a park that people in the neighborhood called Pigeon Park because there are hundreds of pigeons that live in that area, you know. One of the things that I was accustomed to seeing along with the pigeons was the contingent of police in that park. They were not allowed to come in the building so they would have their posts on up assembled across the street from the ballroom. I passed and remember seeing one policeman in the park standing at the gateway, the entrance way. I remarked to myself it seems strange, you know, we usually have a full contingent of policemen out here. I then drove on across the next street and parked my car. I came back to the ballroom and I looked over at the park again and saw that nobody was in the park. That lone police officer was gone.

I then remember seeing at least one police officer on duty and I went in and upstairs to the ballroom where there were three rows of seats. One row, a center aisle, and a third row. And, I took a seat in the middle of the auditorium. I began to look around to check on security, which normally meant just looking at the crowd and glancing over at the booths on the left hand side. I recognized several members of the OAAU seated in those booths. So I get up and went over and I sat with some of the members in a booth. There were about seven or eight people seated on the table. We talked and waited for things to begin. Now we had arranged as part of the event that there would be other people on stage with Malcolm. Milton Gladensen was supposed to have been there, Ralph Cooper was supposed to have been there. May Mallory was supposed to have been there, as well as several others. Anyway, the stage was empty and, uh, while we were sitting there Brother Benjamin comes out and he starts speaking. Brother Benjamin normally warmed up the crowd for Malcolm. He'd speak about fifteen or twenty minutes and then, when he had worked the crowd up and gotten them ready, he would introduce Malcolm. And I remember, on this occasion, he finished his speech by saying that he was now going to give to the brothers and sisters the Black man who was their best friend. Brother Malcolm started out from the anteroom, just off stage right and he walked across the stage towards the podium. As Malcolm approached the podium, Brother Benjamin turned away from the podium to walk towards the seats. There were a row of chairs across the stage and, as he passed Malcolm, Malcolm stopped him and leaned and whispered something in his ear, he said something to him.

Benjamin then turned and walked off the stage. Malcolm walked to the podium and then I could see Benjamin go into this room off the stage and then he came out the door of the room that would allow him to enter the ballroom itself in the aisle alongside the row of seats. He started walking down towards the back of the auditorium. Now I remember he passed about the middle of the auditorium. At that point in time he left my peripheral vision. He later told me that he had been told by Malcolm to go to the phone and call to find out what had happened to Ralph Cooper.

SOULS: Did you notice, before Malcolm spoke or when Benjamin came out, that Betty Shabazz and the children were there that day, near the front row? And did you think anything of it because, generally, Betty was not there?

HF: That's correct. I remember seeing her and the children and being a little surprised. Other than that, I didn't attach any real significance to it.

SOULS: You said previously that there was a change-over of people who were providing security. Were these people in their standard places and did you recognize any of them?

HF: By that time, the security had become, in my opinion, the responsibility of the OAAU. It was no longer the responsibility of those security brothers who mainly were a part of

MMI. The brothers who were on post that day I didn't recognize. And it's not necessarily because they were not part of our organization because there were some brothers that I just didn't know

Now the situation had reached the point where security was so confused. The only way I can put it is that one Sunday I found myself on security. A brother came to me and said, "Brother Herman, we need you on a security post, standing beside the stage, facing the audience, giving security to brother Malcolm." That's the level the security had reached: just pulling somebody. I had no connection with security at all and the brothers knew this. They relieved me after an hour or so and then I relieved the other fellow and we went through the routine but this was something that I was doing because I had seen it done before.

So, we had reached a very critical stage—almost to the point that I would say we had no organized security.

SOULS: As you said before, the security was unarmed with one exception.

HF: Oh yeah, of course. The orders had come down from Malcolm on that Tuesday that nobody would be armed except for one person, Ruben Francis, who was posted in the rear of the auditorium toward the door. Had he been up front, it might have been different story. However, they had so much fire power in that building that day, they would have been able to overcome even two or three security people carrying pistols.

SOULS: Let's pick up the story when Malcolm walks up to the podium and greets the crowd.

HF: He greeted the crowd, "A salaam alaikum, brothers and sisters." He said that and there was a loud crash. Chairs hit the floor. I turned my head to the right because that's where the noise and commotion was coming from. And as I glanced over, in the middle rows, about a couple of rows behind where I was seated, two brothers had jumped to their feet. One brother was facing another brother, who was backing off from him and they both had their hands in their pockets and the one brother said, "Get your hands out of my pocket, nigger."

It was very loud. Everybody could hear this and the place got quiet and Malcolm stepped out from behind the podium and took a step toward the stage. He stood on the lip of the stage and leaned forward and said, "Cool it, brothers and sisters." Everybody was looking down at the area where the commotion was taking place. Malcolm's attention was focused on that. And, as he started to straighten up, there was a loud blast, a boom that filled the auditorium; it was the sound of a weapon going off.

Malcolm straightened up momentarily like this. His hand came up and he stiffened. The shotgun blast, that was the first shot that was fired at him, a sawed off shotgun was fired at him by one of the assassins who fired from the crook of his arm. A police officer said later, when they were interrogating me that it was a skillful shot that he got off. He hit Malcolm point blank in his left chest with that shot.

And when Malcolm straightened up a fuselage of shots rang out. The sound of heavy caliber pistols like they were .45s, and smaller caliber pistols like they may have been .38s. This kept up for several seconds. I remember saying, if they would just stop firing, maybe he could survive this. And they did stop firing after a few seconds. And when they did, Malcolm toppled over backwards. He didn't crumble, he didn't fall all bent at the knees or anything, he just toppled over backwards and the back of his head hit the floor first with a crash. And I remember saying that the gunshot didn't kill him, it was the blow

on the back of his head that had to have killed him. But the one significant thing that I also know is by this point in time, I was still seated in my seat.

Everybody else around the table with me had dived under the table. So I was seated facing the auditorium and I could see everything that was going on. One of the things that I observed that has always been a puzzle to me was that during the time that the firing was gone on, across the top of the stage where the curtains came together, there were lights going off and on. Yellow bright lights. And I said to myself they're not firecrackers, they're not gunshots, they're *flashbulbs.* They are taking pictures of this thing. And it stopped; those flashbulbs stopped going off. It was yellowish and they would go boom, boom, and then back and forth, back and forth, those light bulbs. Then somebody grabbed me and said, "Come on, get under here." He pulled me under. But I went in under feet first. So I was able to watch what was happening and there was a terrible silence. That's the only way I can describe it.

After so much noise—shooting and screaming—there was this sudden silence. And, as I my head was turned toward the audience, I could see all of the chairs and the people lying on the floor. There were three men standing in the center aisle, facing the door. And one of them appeared to have some sort of a weapon in his hands. They were standing in a row, one behind the other. And they stood frozen in time, in space for another few seconds, and then they took off running, hopping over chairs and over people's bodies.

SOULS: These were the three men who fired the shots?

HF: I don't know.

SOULS: Oh. But where were the men who fired the shots standing?

HF: According to what the police told me when they interrogated me, there were four men sitting in the first row. When Malcolm said, "Cool it," they stood up. The man with the sawed off shotgun stepped forward one pace and aimed his shotgun and fired up into Malcolm's chest. And then the others began to fire their weapons. I've since been told that, at that point in time, the two men who had created the commotion ran up toward the stage and began to fire their weapons.

That may have accounted for the pause. The first rounds the four men had emptied into Malcolm and then the two men who came up from behind, the two who created the diversion.

SOULS: So, when the police called you in, they told you that they believed there were four suspects.

HF: There were four. Yes, that's what they said.

SOULS: There has been subsequently a large controversy about who actually killed Malcolm X. Two of three men convicted of the murder were well known in the Muslim community as former members of the Nation of Islam. What do you believe about identities of the men who pulled the trigger that day and killed Malcolm?

HF: Let me step back a pace. When you talk to brothers who were in the Nation of Islam with Malcolm, who had been in Mosque Number Seven, they knew these two brothers. They were enforcers and I recall clearly one day when Malcolm pulled out that week's issue of the *Amsterdam News.* On the front page or somewhere inside the newspaper up near the front of the paper were pictures of these two brothers who had been arrested for

going to the Bronx. A brother had broken away from the Nation of Islam and had opened a mosque of his own in the Bronx. They had been sent there to discuss the matter with him. . . .

SOULS: Could you just say who they are?

HF: I can't remember.

SOULS: No, I'm sorry. You're talking about the two men who were convicted.

HF: What are their names again?

SOULS: You don't need their names but you're talking about the two brothers who were convicted. Can you just say that?

HF: Yeah, the two brothers who served the twenty-five years in prison. They were enforcers and Malcolm pointed them out to us and said that these brothers are never to be allowed in our meetings. If they come around, don't let them in; turn them away. Everybody knew this. So, how anybody who had been part of the Nation of Islam and Mosque Number Seven could allow those brothers entry is [mysterious].

And we had a number of people who were in the audience that day who could have seen those brothers. And I saw some of those people going up and down the aisle, looking, you know, inspecting things. And nobody pointed them out. And the other thing that makes me feel that they are not the guys is the reported terrible condition of one of the guys' legs. He was a karate expert and was being treated by a doctor; his legs were in pain. It didn't make sense that he could be anywhere around that ballroom and run away.

And then, a couple of years back, I was watching a program on television. They were interviewing one of those brothers who had served his twenty-five years. But he wasn't one of the guys. I didn't see that man. The two people I saw were different.

One, this guy is too fair. He's a very light-skinned guy. You know, and I said, no, definitely not. In terms of the second man, I don't know about him, you know, because I hadn't seen him. So those are the two reasons why I feel that those brothers, more than likely, could not have been part of that. I'm certain of the brother they interviewed on television as one of the assassins. As far as I am concerned, he could not have been there. He didn't look like the other two men that I saw.

SOULS: Peter Bailey mentioned to us that he actually saw a number of police in the office near the stairway before the program started. Did you see any police?

HF: I don't know. Yes, I saw police, but not that day.

SOULS: He said that . . .

HF: It was customary for the police to set up their command post in the office of the manager of the ballroom.

HF: And when, from time to time, that door would open it looked like the police brass were sitting around, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes and so on. But that particular day, I'm not sure. I hadn't heard that before.

SOULS: After Malcolm was shot, you went up to the body and knew instinctively that

he had expired, and you turned to go back outside. Can you describe what happened next?

HF: When I went outside, I stepped through the door onto the sidewalk, and as I looked to my right, there was a big commotion going on in the street about the middle of the block. I saw a crowd of people had a man up in the air and they were pulling and tugging on him. There was a policeman there who fired a shot in the air to disperse the crowd. I turned to the left and walked a few paces down to Broadway and stood on the corner of Broadway and 166th Street. There was a prosthetics store that sold false arms and legs and I believe it had something to do with the hospital across the street.

So, as I stood there in the window of that building: looking, watching, and concerned with what I had just seen—Malcolm's death—a group of brothers came rushing by with Malcolm. They came by with a gurney from the hospital. Then, a few minutes later, they came back with this gurney and they were pushing Malcolm on it and, as they passed me, I looked down at Malcolm. I could already see the pallor, the grayish pallor of his face.

His head was back and his shirt was opened; his collar and his tie was pulled down. You could see his chest, his bare chest. And you could see the bullet holes around his breast, a pattern of about seven bullet holes, holes large enough to fit your little finger. And I remember thinking to myself that he was gone. There was no question about it. And, as I stood there, they wheeled him across the street and into the hospital.

As I continued to stand there on the corner, a police car came down Broadway going north. It made a right turn, a slight right turn into 166th Street and stopped right on the corner, sort of catty-cornered, the tail end of the car protruding out of Broadway and the head pointed into 166th Street. There were two policemen in that car. One of them was police brass. He had the scrambled eggs on his hat. And the other was just a regular driver. The police officer, the brass guy, got out of the car and walked towards the Audubon's revolving doorway.

And, as he walked, it didn't dawn on me that anything was happening. It was a big deal. Malcolm had been shot and was possibly dead. So it made sense, to me, that the police brass would be there with police all over the place. But then I noticed in a few seconds, the same officer came back escorting a man who had on a brown overcoat and a fez on his head with all kinds of jewelry and stuff on it.

SOULS: Wasn't it a kufi?

HF: A pillbox type hat. Anyway, the policeman was escorting him. The man was leaning on a policeman and, when they got to the car, the policeman opened the back door, helped the man into the car and closed the door. When the policeman closed the door, you know, I couldn't account for this man. You know, I'm thinking in terms of this being one of our guys. So, I stepped over to the car, and I put my head inside the back seat and looked at this man, he wasn't anyone who was familiar to me. He had sort of an olive complexion. I can't say what age he was. But he was obviously in great pain. He was slumped over, holding his mid-section and and I had to bend down and look into his face. But the pain it was obvious, it was in his face. So I'm saying to myself, well, he's been shot. And he's one of our guys that got shot. So, the officer got into the car and told the driver to get out of here. Well, I expected them to make a u-turn with this guy who was obviously wounded and needed medical attention and go right across the street to the hospital, but they didn't do that. They kept going down towards the river—across the street, down that incline, and disappeared out of sight.

I never saw them again. And I often wondered—I go, "What did I see?" About six months later, I saw one of our men who had been wounded, a brother named Wiley

Brown. He had been on duty at the door. He told me that when the shots were fired on the inside, he wasn't clear what was happening so he tried to take cover. And as he did that, he ran across the platform he was standing on, leading to the stairs, leading down. A man came around the corner and hit him. They collided and went down the stairs and that's when he got shot. I said I saw the police take you across the street in their car. He said that he walked over to the hospital. And, at that point, I really had a problem. What had I seen and who was this guy? To this day, I have no clue. I have no idea.

SOULS: In retrospect, what do you think happened that day? Who do you feel is responsible for the murder of Malcolm X?

HF: I think the government was responsible. I think they were responsible for the planning of it. The execution of it was also partly done by the government but I think they used a mix of former members of the Nation of Islam and the Fruit of Islam, and certainly they had professional assassins as part of that team. One of the professionals that they used was the guy who fired that shotgun. He had to have been a professional. That was a professional shot. And I know something about weapons and you would not have any old body trying to fire a shotgun.

A shotgun is a very difficult weapon to fire with any degree of accuracy. And a sawed off shotgun, you know? And this man just rested on his arm like so and fired from fifteen feet into Malcolm. The first shot, and the only shot that he took on Malcolm was fatal. So I think it was the government. Although, I think that they had to have support from within the Nation of Islam. I think that some of the higher-ups in the Nation Of Islam had to have been a part of that. They had to have somebody close to Malcolm who knew his comings and goings, his whereabouts, his lifestyle. I also think that they probably had people within our organization who were part of that. And I think that makes a lot of sense because they knew that they could get away, that the police could assure them of their safe haven and passageway after the deed was done. When you stand there and 700 of Malcolm's followers are there and ready to tear you limb from limb, and you have fired all of these bullets, and you have no more bullets, you are not going to get away without help. So I think that there had to have been somebody who was part of our organization that was, and if you've read Carl Evans' book in which he talks about the Judas Factor; it really has to be given serious consideration. Who did it? I don't know. As I said before, you need to look at the person who was in charge of security that day. But I think that whoever the person was, and it may have been several people, they would have been with us for awhile.

SOULS: Who do you think burned the mosque?

HF: I think the government did that. That was definitely the kind of thing that the CIA could do. And the type of fire, I mean, it's suddenly, "Pow!" You know, it wasn't a gasoline type fire or one of those type things where you put a rag down and soaked it in kerosene and a couple of hours later, you know, somebody would smell the smoke. This was a professional hit job. Malcolm's assassination and death did more to bring the liberation started by our people to a plateau than anything else that happened. If you recall that when King was murdered, cities went up in flames. But they did not destroy the civil rights movement. They destroyed the Black Nationalist movement when they killed Malcolm. Fear, concern, and apprehension were rife in the community, and everybody saw it. And I think the reason the shooters continued to fire on his body after they had assassinated him, knowing that he was dead, was that they wanted to teach us a lesson: this is what we do with revolutionaries. And this is a lesson to you. You don't want the

same thing. We'll give it to you. And they delivered that message fairly successful. It set us back tremendously but, as Malcolm's seeds began to sprout and develop other organizations and other individuals came on the scene, you know, like the Republic of New Africa and the . . .

SOULS: . . . Blank Panthers.

HF: Yes. The Panthers. How could I forget them?

SOULS: Do you have any thoughts or comments on Malcolm's funeral? Did you attend subsequent meetings of the OAAU and, if so, what happened after Malcolm died? And what are your general impressions of what happened to the OAAU after Malcolm was killed?

HF: In terms of the funeral, I recall it being a very cool day and we had to stand outside behind the police horses. It was difficult to get in and I remember that some of the security brothers who had not been around for awhile came and got me over the line and took me inside and gave me a seat. And, so I watched the ceremony. And then, following that, we went out to the grave site where the attendants didn't want to bury the body yet. I can't recall whether it was because it was raining or whatever. But the brothers said that they will bury him themselves and they used their hands, they took the shovels and began to fill the grave.

It was a very sad occasion when I viewed the coffin. Malcolm was dressed in his Muslim garb, in the Muslim manner, swathed in white from head to foot. And I felt that we had sustained a great loss and I think that very few of us understood the contribution that Malcolm still had to make to our struggle. I felt that his story needed to be told and that those of us who were still left needed to carry on. And what bothered me to a great extent is that that really did not happen. I remembered that there were a couple of meetings called. I remember Sarah Mitchell called a meeting and I remember, and she said some things to us. She claimed that she had spent time with Malcolm on that Saturday before the Sunday of his assassination, and that during that meeting he had left certain instructions. Things he wanted to happen for the organization to carry on, if anything happened to him. I don't know how true that was. Betty called two or three meetings. She tried to revive the organization but the people who she called were only those people who she would have been comfortable with. I know she called me but I think she only called me because of who I was, you know? I was acceptable because I had a position at the Board of Education.

But she was trying to start this up again and I think, there were only two or three meetings before I stopped going I felt that because the liberation school had launched a program to train people to be leaders in their communities, and to train them to spread Malcolm's philosophy and ideology. I decided I would go back to my home community and put that into action. And this is what I did, I went back and started working in the south Jamaica area using what influence I had among the children in the school there. On Saturdays, we used to go out on the street corners. We raised enough money to buy sound equipment to put on my car and we would go from neighborhood to neighborhood talking. Then we began to do other things with the children. There was a storefront church right on the corner from the school. On Saturday afternoons, we had an arrangement with the minister to go in his church and show a film.

After this experience of working with children, I came to the attention of the police. They put an undercover agent in our organization. What I was trying to do was spread Malcolm's basic beliefs about self-determination—that we needed to decide for our-

selves, for once, what we wanted to do, what our destiny and our relationship with the United States government would be. As such, we dealt with opening a business and encouraging Black businesses by asking people to buy Black. As far as self-defense, we started a gun club. We registered it with the National Rifle Association (NRA) and with the State of New York. Betty Shabazz was one of the first people we invited to be a member of the organization. She joined and she would go to shoot with us. The children were too young but we made a decision that they would be given honorary lifetime membership in our gun club—Betty Shabazz and the children. In my file, the police list her as Betty . . .

SOULS: Sanders?

HF: Yes, Betty Sanders. That's the name. So they use an ancient conspiracy law and they said that we were plotting to overthrow the government and that one of the other people and myself were plotting to assassinate the civil rights leaders Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young. Based on the agent's testimony alone, an all-white, all-male jury in Queens, found us guilty and sentenced us to three and half to seven; we refused to cooperate with the authorities. We said that they had no authority over us because, by that time, my co-defendant and I were both citizens of the Republic of New Africa and we claimed that we were not citizens of the United States government so they should be dealing with our minister of foreign affairs and we would refer them to those persons who fill those posts. We were found non-cooperative and we were told we'd have to carry out the sentencing.

We decided we didn't owe the United States any of that time so we just fled the country and went down to Guyana, South America, where I stayed for nineteen years and where my co-defendant, Arthur Harrison, is still in exile. He left Guyana after a couple of years and went to England, but has since left England and now lives in Sweden. He's been married and has a nice family there. I doubt if he'll ever come back here. That is the price we paid for deciding that we needed our own independence and we needed to have our human right and all these other things that other people have. You know, this country punishes you and they never forgive nor forget. And this is something that we [as Black people] have to understand.

SOULS: But it's because of your sacrifice and what Malcolm did that we are ultimately going to win.

HF: I hope so. I think we will win.

SOULS: No doubt about it.

HF: There's no question.