

Malcolm X and the Draft

"Not long after Reginald left, I dragged out the wildest zoot suit in New York. This was 1943. The Boston draft board had written me at Ella's, and when they had no results there, had notified the New York draft board, and, in care of Sammy, I received Uncle Sam's Greetings.

In those days only three things in the world scared me: jail, a job, and the Army. I had about ten days before I was to show up at the induction center. I went right to work. The Army Intelligence soldiers, those black spies in civilian clothes, hung around in Harlem with their ears open for the white man downtown. I knew exactly where to start dropping the word. I started noising around that I was frantic to join -- the Japanese Army.

When I seemed that I had the ears of the spies, I would talk and act high and crazy. A lot of Harlem hustlers actually had reached that state -- as I would later. It was inevitable when one had gone long enough on heavier and heavier narcotics, and under the steadily tightening vise of the hustling life. I'd snatch out and read my Greetings aloud, to make certain they heard who I was, and then I'd report downtown. (This was probably the only time my real name was ever heard in Harlem in those days.)

The day I went down there, I costumed like an actor. With my wild zoot suit I wore the yellow knob-toe shoes, and I frizzled my hair up into a reddish bush of conk.

I went in, skipping and tipping, and I thrust my tattered Greetings at that reception desk's white soldier -- "Crazy-o, daddy-o, get me moving. I can't wait to get in that brown--, " very likely that soldier hasn't recovered from me yet.

They had their wire on me from uptown, all right. But they still put me through the line. In that big starting room were forty or fifty other prospective inductees. The room had fallen vacuum-quiet, with me running my mouth a mile a minute, talking nothing but slang. I was going to fight on all fronts: I was going to be a general, man, before I got done -- such talk as that.

Most of them were white, of course. The tender-looking ones appeared ready to run from me. Some others had that vinegary "worst kind of nigger" look. And a few were amused, seeing me as the "Harlem jigaboo" archetype.

Also amused were some of the room's ten or twelve Negroes. But the stony-faced rest of them looked as if they were ready to sign up to go off killing somebody -- they would have liked to start with me.

The line moved along Pretty soon, stripped to my shorts, I was making my eager-to-join comments in the medical examination rooms -- and everybody in the white coats that I saw had 4-F in his eyes.

I stayed in the line longer than I expected, before they siphoned me off. One of the white coats accompanied me around a turning hallway: I knew we were on the way to a headshrinker -- the Army psychiatrist.

The receptionist there was a Negro nurse. I remember she was in her early twenties, and not bad to look at. She was one of those Negro "firsts."