



Muhammad Ali: An Unusual Leader in the Advancement of Black America

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Muhammad Ali: An Unusual Leader in the Advancement of Black America

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Abstract

The rhetoric and life of Muhammad Ali greatly influenced the advancement of African Americans. How did the words of Ali impact the development of black America in the twentieth century? What role does Ali hold in history? Ali was a supremely talented artist in the boxing ring, but he was also acutely aware of his cultural significance. The essential question that must be answered is how Ali went from being one of the most reviled people in white America to an icon of humanitarianism for all people. He sought knowledge through personal experience and human interaction and was profoundly influenced by his own upbringing in the throes of Louisville's Jim Crow segregation. His family history and general understanding of the black experience in America enabled him to serve as a conduit for many of the prominent African-American voices that came before him. He was, at the very least, implicitly aware of the views of previous black thinkers and had the innate ability of carrying an indefatigably powerful voice for the cause of black advancement. Ali simply had the knack to take what came before him and push forward the black cause. He played an essential role for the progress of black America through his pointed rhetoric and cultural influence. He transformed the role of the black athlete in America and supplemented the work of more formal leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Ali's rhetoric came to life during interviews, speeches, and impromptu dialogue. In sum, Ali was vital to the progress of black America and should be placed among the most influential African Americans in history.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Muhammad Ali is one of the most significant athletes in American history. He is one of countless African Americans who have contributed to black advancement from the days of Phillis Wheatley through the era of the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Unquestionably, Ali deserves a rightful place in the field of black thought alongside traditional thinkers. The voice of freedom for African Americans became louder from the nontraditional platform of sports, and no athlete was the face of the movement more so than Ali. Fittingly, a pugilist led the movement of African-American athletes in the fight for racial justice. In the ring with his fists and outside the ring with his rhetoric Ali captivated the world.

Ali loved to talk—he had a pure rhetorical gift. As a relatively unknown eighteen-year old in the 1960 Rome Olympics, fellow Olympian Paula Jean Myers Pope remarked, “[Ali] was always preaching, no matter where it was—in the cafeteria, out on the grounds, in the enormous village, downtown, over at the boxing venue. He was always talking.”¹ People naturally gravitated to him. He is placed in the conversation amongst the world’s most noble people, as British writer Richard Harris held with conviction, “[Ali] stands to me shoulder-to-shoulder with Mandela who was, you know, one of the world’s great heroes. I mean equally stands beside Mandela, and that you have

¹ Paula Jean Myers Pope quoted in David Maraniss, *Rome 1960: The Olympics That Changed the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 76.

to ask yourself, ‘why?’”² Why and how did Ali rise to such global distinction? These are the fundamental questions to defining Ali. In sum, Ali’s undeniable prominence in the last sixty years supplemented the work of previous leaders such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The worldwide impact of his words is confounding as Pulitzer Prize winning author David Remnick mentioned, “to think about how a gangly kid from segregated Louisville willed himself to become one of the great original improvisers in American history, a brother to Davy Crockett, Walt Whitman, Duke Ellington.”³ It is clear that his rhetoric and actions provided added pronouncement to the effort for equality; thus, he is deserving of a place on the intellectual continuum of black advancement in American history.

Ali was a supremely talented artist in the boxing ring and he was also acutely aware of his importance outside of the sport. The seminal British sportswriter, Hugh McIlvanney, who covered the sports world for over six decades observed, “Here was a totally remarkable human being. Sport was his context, but his real stage was humanity.”⁴ In his humanitarian role, Ali consciously scrutinized past influential African Americans and built on their legacies. He was a highly provocative figure as he comported himself in a manner that was contrary to the norms of segregation. Barack

² Richard Harris quoted in *Muhammad Ali: Through the Eyes of the World*, dir. Phil Grabsky (United Kingdom: TWI, 2001), DVD.

³ David Remnick, “American Hunger,” *The New Yorker*, October 12, 1998, accessed August 9, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/10/12/american-hunger>.

⁴ Hugh McIlvanney quoted in *Muhammad Ali: Through the Eyes of the World*, DVD.

Obama aptly noted, “Ali was a radical even in a radical’s time; a loud, proud, unabashedly black voice in a Jim Crow world.”⁵ While educating himself on his forerunners, Ali was also intent on learning about the various groups in the 1960s resisting segregation. He commented in a 1964 interview,

I don’t know who that Muslim speaker was, but everything he said made sense. The man made me think about many things I had wondered about. But I didn’t join right away. I went to CORE, Urban League and N.A.A.C.P. meetings. I studied the Catholics, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists and Methodists in search of knowledge. The most concrete thing I found in churches was segregation. Well, now I have learned to accept my own and be myself. I know we are original man and that we are the greatest people on the planet earth and our women the queens thereof.⁶

Ali evidently sought knowledge through personal experience and human interaction after being profoundly influenced by his Louisville upbringing in the Jim Crow South. His family history, his struggles, his travels, and his general understanding of the black experience enabled him to serve as a conduit for many of the voices that came before him. Years later, Ali reflected, “I had to prove you could be a new kind of black man. I had to show that to the world.”⁷ In effect, he wanted to be the black man who stood up to his oppressors in an effort to dignify his race for future generations.

⁵ Barack Obama’s Statement Delivered by Valerie Jarrett in Melanie Garunay, “President Obama’s Tribute to Muhammad Ali: ‘He Will Always Be America,’” The White House, June 10, 2016, accessed August 8, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2016/06/10/president-obamas-tribute-muhammad-ali-he-will-always-be-america>.

⁶ Muhammad Ali in John R. McDermott, “Champ 23: A Man-Child Taken in by the Muslims,” *Life*, March 6, 1964, 38-39.

⁷ Ali quoted in Remnick, “American Hunger.”

Ali possessed a unique brilliance. He graduated from Louisville's Central High School ranked 376 out of 391 and was believed to have a below-average I.Q.⁸ It was obvious, though, that he had a great mind, as his high school principal Atwood Wilson told his faculty, "One day our greatest claim to fame is going to be that we knew Cassius Clay, or taught him."⁹ Indeed, despite Ali's poor academic record, he served as a college graduation speaker on numerous occasions. Ali was mindful of history and had the innate ability of carrying an indefatigably powerful voice for the cause of black advancement, including for Martin Luther King, Jr. King, for instance, emphatically stated, "no matter what you think of Mr. Muhammad Ali's religion, you certainly have to admire his courage."¹⁰ Ali simply had the knack to take what came before him and have a transcendent impact on pushing forward the black cause.

The medium Ali used, or possibly the medium that used him, came from the platform of being heavyweight champion—a media platform that was not necessarily available to his predecessors. Ali arrived at just the right time when television was on the verge of exploding in popularity and indelibly transforming the way information was dispensed to the world. He understood how Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion, used his status as an outspoken champion in the early twentieth century and

⁸ Gerald Eskenazi, "Young Cassius Had I. Q. of 78, 10 Points Below School's Par," *New York Times*, March 21, 1964, 18.

⁹ Atwood Wilson quoted in Sean Gregory, "Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone," *Time*, June 4, 2016, accessed June 22, 2016, <http://time.com/3646214/muhammad-ali-dead-obituary/>.

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, dir. Bill Siegel (USA: Kartemquin, 2013), Netflix.

then Ali adapted it to the 1960s and 1970s when mass media was rapidly growing with the constant presence of reporters and cameras. Ali was a master of words and a fascinating provocateur to whom the press gravitated. The well-known British broadcaster, Michael Parkinson, once remarked, “When people ask me . . . who was the most remarkable man I ever met, I answer without hesitation: Ali. I interviewed him four times. I lost on every occasion.”¹¹ Ali simply mesmerized the public with his personality and eloquence. As a twenty-year old he brazenly proclaimed to the world, “I will be twenty-one January the seventeenth, and I predict that by the end of 1963, I will be the youngest heavyweight champion in history.”¹² He might have been the most self-assured twenty-year old athlete in the history of sports. Simply put, Ali was implausible, but his words were soon to resonate amongst the widest of circles.

Douglass and DuBois may have been “originators” of black thought, but Ali was a catalyst in furthering their cause through the medium available to him. Ali was proud to be black and his vocalization allowed other blacks to live with more honor. In the midst of his persecution for defying the Vietnam War draft, he confidently stated, “I’m so black, man, I don’t care. I’m not going to compromise. I’m not going to do anything to mislead my people. I get pleasure out of walking down the alleys, walking through the

¹¹ Michael Parkinson quoted in Jess Staufenberg, “Muhammad Ali Dead: From George Foreman to Nelson Mandela – What Others Said about ‘The Greatest,’” *The Independent*, June 4, 2016, accessed July 12, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/muhammad-ali-dead-what-others-said-about-the-greatest-a7065176.html>.

¹² Ali quoted in *Muhammad Ali: Through the Eyes of the World*, DVD.

ghettos, walking up to little black children.”¹³ Ali went about the role of leading and setting an example for his black brethren with extreme passion. For instance, he continued fighting into the late 1970s when he knew that it was adversely affecting his health because it gave him the elevated platform to positively influence his followers. Ali was the example and the inspiration to his race during a tumultuous era. The words of baseball great Reggie Jackson candidly spoke to this effect:

Do you know what Ali meant to black people? He was the leader of a nation; the leader of black America. As a young black, at times I was ashamed of my color; I was ashamed of my hair. And Ali made me proud. I’m just as happy being black now as somebody else is being white, and Ali was part of that growing process. I remember how I felt when Martin Luther King was assassinated. There was no one to cling to except Ali. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d had that kind of leadership burden thrust upon me. . . . Do you understand what it did for black Americans to know that the most physically gifted, possibly the most handsome, and one of the most charismatic men in the world was black? Ali helped raise black people in this country out of mental slavery. The entire experience of being black changed for millions of people because of Ali.¹⁴

The mental slavery to which Jackson alludes is the very point that Ali was hoping to address. He had experienced the perils of prejudice in Louisville and understood that it would take unflinching devotion to challenge years of embedded racism that were rooted in the horrific days of slavery. Ali represented America’s history—both the darkness and the light. Barack Obama put it candidly in his statement delivered at Ali’s funeral:

“Muhammad Ali was America. Brash, defiant, pioneering, joyful, never tired, always game to test the odds. He was our most basic freedoms—religion, speech, spirit. He embodied our ability to invent ourselves. His life spoke to our original sin of slavery and

¹³ Ali quoted in Gerald Early, ed., *The Muhammad Ali Reader* (New York: Harper Collins, Ecco, 2013), 85.

¹⁴ Reggie Jackson quoted in Thomas Hauser and Neil Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), [9].

discrimination, and the journey he traveled helped to shock our conscience and lead us on a roundabout path toward salvation. And, like America, he was always very much a work in progress.”¹⁵ Ali experienced many bumps on his own path to salvation but a constant for him was always speaking up and voicing his opinions on some of the most significant issues of his day. Ali’s defiance to societal norms was palpable and can be summed up with one of the most poignant statements of his life as he entered the spotlight of the world in 1964: “I know where I’m going, and I know the truth, and I don’t have to be what you want me to be. I’m free to be what I want.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Obama quoted in Garunay, “President Obama’s Tribute to Muhammad Ali.”

¹⁶ Ali quoted in Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (London: Verso, 2005), 8.

Chapter II

Race and Boxing in Perspective

The story of boxing and African Americans goes back centuries when the sport came from England and was introduced to slaves. Slave owners were careful not to allow their slaves to get too involved in the brutal nature of the sport for the fear of permanent injury, as they did not lose sight of the larger role that slaves played in their economic structures.¹⁷ In some instances, however, southern plantation owners matched up slaves who appeared to be of equal strength and let them fight. They would then bet on certain slaves for entertainment. Slaves often came close to dying because of the diabolical nature of the matches, a significant reason why prominent abolitionists like Frederick Douglass detested boxing and wrestling. To them, it exacerbated the wickedness of slavery.¹⁸

The “color line” in boxing was established by the first champion of the modern era in the 1880s, John L. Sullivan, when he declared: “I will not fight a Negro. I never have and I never shall.”¹⁹ His successor, Jim Jeffries, swore to the same thing and retired never having fought a black man; however, Jeffries was forced to go back on his word when Jack Johnson became the first black heavyweight champion of the world in 1908

¹⁷ Elliot J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 34-35.

¹⁸ David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (New York: Random House, 1998), 221.

¹⁹ John L. Sullivan quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 222.

after defeating Tommy Burns in Australia. As the match against Burns neared, Johnson had been continually harassed with racial epithets but managed to stay focused and easily won. It was a high moment for African Americans in sport. The *New York Times* summed up the results of the fight the next day with the following words: “Johnson appeared fresh after the fight, while Burns’ eyes were badly puffed and his mouth swollen to twice its normal size. The Canadian fought a game battle and showed indomitable pluck, but he was no match for the big black Texan.”²⁰ This was a watermark occasion in African-American history as white society suddenly became obsessed with redemption.

Johnson was awarded the championship to the chagrin of most American boxing fans and regularly defended the championship not shying away from any challengers. He behaved with conceit and angered whites with his behavior. After each fight he immediately took his purse and bought himself extravagant items.²¹ Johnson purposely scheduled fights against white men who were eager to regain the championship for their race. He thrived on this attitude because he enjoyed beating up angry white racists. America’s white establishment was searching for a suitable opponent for Johnson and the press grew increasingly impatient.

Leading the charge for the press was well-known novelist, Jack London, who was also an established boxing correspondent for the *New York Herald*. London, no friend of the African-American community, printed the famous lines in the *Herald* that caught

²⁰ *New York Times*, December 26, 1908.

²¹ Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!* (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, 1975), 21.

Jeffries' attention and drew him back into the ring: "Jeffries must emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that smile from Johnson's face. Jeff it's up to you."²² The former champion was now all but forced out of retirement to answer London's call for the "Great White Hope" and reclaim the title for the Caucasian race. Jeffries was encouraged by his fans and also racially motivated, though he was not eager about returning to the ring: "I am going into this fight for the sole purpose of proving that a white man is better than a Negro."²³ Jeffries' ill-served motivation wound up contributing to the most famous sporting event in history up to that point.

The fight was scheduled to take place in San Francisco in the summer of 1910, but anti-boxing fans persuaded the governor of California not to allow the "brutal exhibition" for moral purposes.²⁴ When the fight was canceled, Reno jumped at the chance to host the fight on the Fourth of July with the hopes of gaining notoriety. Jeffries, who was being trained by former champion "Gentleman" Jim Corbett, had shed dozens of pounds to get into fighting shape for what was being tabbed as the "The Fight of the Century." The fight turned out to bring in a vast amount of money for Reno's businesses, especially for the gambling casinos and saloons.²⁵ There has not been an event in Reno's history since that has garnered so much worldwide attention. According to Nevada historian, Robert Laxalt, the population of Reno multiplied more than two-fold

²² Jack London quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 222.

²³ Jim Jeffries quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 222.

²⁴ Robert Laxalt, *Nevada: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 144.

²⁵ Laxalt, *Nevada: A Bicentennial History*, 146.

in the days prior to the fight: “Every hotel room in town was taken and miles of special trains with sleeping cars lined the tracks.”²⁶

When the long awaited fight took place on July 4, 1910, Johnson was greeted with screams of “Kill the nigger!” and “All Coons Look Alike to Me.”²⁷ The fans were squeezed into the arena, which was specially built for the occasion. The oppressive heat only added to the tension of the fight, as it was clear from the start that Johnson was the superior fighter. Johnson easily handled Jeffries and taunted him from start to finish. Johnson wrote in his autobiography, “Hardly a blow had been struck when I knew that I was Jeff’s master.”²⁸ Johnson knocked Jeffries down in the fourteenth round and his corner forfeited in the next round to prevent further devastation. In Laxalt’s history of Nevada he wrote, “Johnson battered the aging Jeffries into a helpless pulp.”²⁹ The crowd was shocked and silenced. Surprisingly, there was not any violence in Reno after the fight; however, Reno was not representative of the rest of the country.³⁰

As blacks celebrated Johnson’s victory, some of the worst race riots in United States history broke out across the country. White Americans were clearly unhappy with the results of the fight as one *Boston American* article stated: “Declaring that Independence Day had been dishonored and disguised by a brutal prize fight; that the

²⁶ Laxalt, *Nevada: A Bicentennial History*, 146.

²⁷ Remnick, *King of the World*, 223.

²⁸ Jack Johnson quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 223.

²⁹ Laxalt, *Nevada: A Bicentennial History*, 147.

³⁰ Laxalt, *Nevada: A Bicentennial History*, 147.

moral sense of a nation had been outraged.”³¹ There were reported riots in Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and the District of Columbia. In Manhattan, police rescued a black man who was about to be lynched, and in Houston a black man had his throat slashed for celebrating Johnson’s victory.³² Thousands of whites gathered on Eighth Avenue, threatening to beat any black man who showed up, and according to author David Remnick: “no racial event until the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., in 1968, would set off such a violent reaction.”³³ In the end, there were at least ten deaths and scores injured.³⁴ Racist whites were persecuting Johnson everywhere he went with shouts of “Lynch him! Kill the nigger!”³⁵ The fight established Johnson’s legacy because he defeated the “Great White Hope.” Meanwhile, authorities made a concerted effort to make his life more difficult.

Johnson was known to take his earnings and immediately spend them on luxuries. He lived ostentatiously, owning flashy cars, smoking cigars, and drinking expensive wine and champagne. He liked many women and most of them were white during a time when African Americans were being lynched and forced to use inadequate segregated facilities. Moreover, Johnson had become cultured through his life experiences and was an avid reader of novels in English, French, and Spanish. His arrogance and disregard made him a wanted man during a time when blacks were treated unjustly. The government worked

³¹ *Boston American*, July 5, 1910.

³² Remnick, *King of the World*, 223.

³³ Remnick, *King of the World*, 223.

³⁴ Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!*, 72.

³⁵ Remnick, *King of the World*, 223.

persistently to incarcerate the champion, whether it was legal or illegal. In 1913, they finally convicted him under concocted charges of violating the Mann Act, a law stating that women could not be transported across state lines for immoral purposes. There was an eleven-count indictment against Johnson, and a white jury quickly found him guilty sentencing him to a year in jail. Johnson, however, once again defied the white establishment by escaping to Mexico, Canada, and Europe while out on bond, only to return seven years later to serve his year-long sentence for his unlawful conviction.³⁶

Johnson's fight with Jeffries has been the catalyst for his undying legacy as it ignited the fire between him and America's white society. Johnson not only became a noted sports figure, but also a major political and social figure and, in all likelihood, the most famous African American in the world during his prime. His efforts have long been remembered because he broke the color barrier of champions in boxing and established a foundation for future great black heavyweights such as Joe Louis, Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, and Ali. Indeed, there were more black fighters; however, many of the same racist attitudes prevailed as soon as Jack Dempsey became champion in 1919. Dempsey's first public statement after winning the heavyweight championship was: "I will pay no attention to Negro challengers."³⁷ These words exemplified the general feeling toward African Americans throughout the country during the early part of the twentieth century. To that end, it is amazing to think that Johnson did what he did in spite of the racism that existed during his day. In the words of the late sports journalist Dick Schaap, "think of the forces that shaped him, of the time which he lived, and accept

³⁶ Remnick, *King of the World*, 224.

³⁷ Jack Dempsey quoted in *New York Times*, July 6, 1919, 17.

one conclusion: He must have been some man.”³⁸ Future generations of African Americans used Johnson’s legacy to fuel their own defiance to racism in the United States. For instance, Johnson’s persona of challenging white society through boxing laid the groundwork for Ali to challenge the laws of segregation and Jim Crow.

In the prime of Ali’s career, the famous actor James Earl Jones depicted Johnson in the film, *The Great White Hope*. Ali attended the movie set and mentioned that his own forced exile from boxing due to his refusal to participate in the Vietnam War was akin to Johnson being exiled from fighting in the United States because of wrongful persecution by the federal government. Ali continued his homage to Johnson by stating, “I grew to love the Jack Johnson image. I wanted to be rough, tough, arrogant, the nigger white folks didn’t like.”³⁹ Ali certainly embraced this attitude and was eager to test Jim Crow traditions in a way that America had not before witnessed. In so doing, he joined the Nation of Islam in 1964, and was quickly associated with the vitriolic viewpoints of the group’s leader Elijah Muhammad and popular preacher Malcolm X.

³⁸ Dick Schaap quoted in Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!*, 21.

³⁹ Muhammad Ali quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 224.

Chapter III

Discovering Muhammad Ali

It is important to identify where Ali truly stood on race issues. Like Johnson, Ali did not hate whites; both men detested racism and the pall of Jim Crow. Ali did not want to live in a society where he was considered a second-rate citizen. In fact, he was friends with whites throughout his life. He simply would not succumb to a society where blacks were subjugated to treatment that was borne out of slavery. Like many young African Americans growing up in the 1950s, Ali's innocence on race issues was shattered when fourteen-year old Emmett Till was murdered in 1955. Till and Ali were essentially the same age. Ali remembered feeling disgusted when he saw the picture of Till's mangled face in the open casket: "It made me sick, and it scared me. I was full of sadness and confusion. I didn't realize how hateful some people could be until that day."⁴⁰ Still, Ali did not join the Nation of Islam because of hate—he joined because of his commitment to faith and peace—but he desperately wanted to confront racism in America. Ali's close friend and trainer Angelo Dundee, who was white, spoke straightforwardly about the sincere goodness that made up the character of his fighter in 1964: "If the Muslims teach hate, then Cassius is not a Muslim. This boy is incapable of hate. I think he is involved with these Muslims just because people don't want him to be."⁴¹ This is especially

⁴⁰ Ali quoted in Muhammad Ali and Hana Yasmeen Ali, *The Soul of a Butterfly: Reflections on Life's Journey* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 11.

⁴¹ Angelo Dundee quoted in McDermott, "Champ 23," 38.

telling because Ali was able to stay well-liked by many whites throughout his career despite being a member of the controversial Nation of Islam.

The challenge of understanding Ali is one that involves intense confusion and careful interpretation. There were some in the 1960s who argued that Ali was anti-American or anti-white, and if one were to carefully select from his rhetoric, the argument can certainly be made. In essence, Ali was a continual work in progress in his fifty-plus years in the public spotlight which made him a challenge to definitively understand. Jack Olsen wrote *Black Is Best: The Riddle of Cassius Clay*, in 1966, with the hope of discovering the crux of Ali.⁴² Olsen found that Ali was an enigma:

Clay's personality is like a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces were cut by a drunken carpenter, a jumbled collection of moods and attitudes that do not seem to interlock. Sometimes, he sounds like a religious fanatic, his voice singsong and chanting, and all at once he will turn into a calm, reasoning, if confused, student of the scriptures. He is a loudmouth windbag and at the same time a remarkably sincere and dedicated athlete. He can be a kindly benefactor of the neighborhood children and vicious bully in the ring, a prissy Puritan totally intolerant of drinkers and smokers, and a teller of dirty jokes.⁴³

The difficulty that Olsen has in forming a conclusive evaluation is very much because Ali felt that it was necessary to use unconventional methods to arrive to universally desirable results. Ali was reviled in some circles because he represented a brashness toward traditional expectations in America; conversely, it can be argued that Ali held controversial stances because he yearned for an America that was true to the fundamental values stressed in its *Declaration of Independence* and *Constitution*.

⁴² Jack Olsen, *Black Is Best; the Riddle of Cassius Clay* (New York: Putnam, 1967).

⁴³ Olsen quoted in Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith, *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X* (New York: Basic, 2016), x.

For instance, during the 1960 Rome Olympics, he was questioned by a Soviet reporter about the racial state of affairs in America. His response was one of fierce defense: “Tell your readers we got qualified people working on that, and I’m not worried about the outcome. To me the U.S.A. is the best country in the world, counting yours. It may be hard to get something to eat sometimes, but anyhow I ain’t fighting alligators and living in a mud hut.”⁴⁴ Ali was clearly never shy in voicing his opinion, whether it was to defend America or criticize its questionable policies. The press in Rome, in fact, labeled him as “Uncle Sam’s unofficial goodwill ambassador” and referenced his “solid Americanism.”⁴⁵ His status as Olympic champion gave Ali the early stage to promote himself and his feelings; in short, the Olympic platform provided a screening of what was to be levied on the world over the next generation. Upon his return from Rome he was greeted at the Louisville airport by his supporters when Ali expressed himself in poem verse:

To Make America the greatest is my goal
So I beat the Russian, I beat the Pole
And for the USA won the Medal of Gold
Italians said ‘You’re greater than the Cassius his old.’
We like your name, we like your game,
So make Rome your home if you will.
I said I appreciate your kind hospitality, But the USA is my country still,
‘Cause they’re waiting to welcome me in Louisville.⁴⁶

Ali’s amateur poetry here was a preview of the oral fluency with which he was to gift the world in the future. Though he was not much of a student in a formal educational setting,

⁴⁴ Ali quoted in Randy Roberts, “Muhammad Ali Center,” *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 1 (2009): 175.

⁴⁵ Maraniss, *Rome 1960*, 77.

⁴⁶ Ali, *The Soul of a Butterfly*, 35.

he embraced his opportunities for intellectual growth through his daily engagements and many relationships.

Ali's gradual enlightenment of 1960s America continued to grow as he began educating himself on Islam shortly after his Olympic success. Ali was enraged that social progress was moving at such a slow pace. He learned that even as an Olympic champion who led his fellow athletes with patriotic zeal that he was still considered a second-rate citizen in Louisville: "I won a gold medal representing the United States at the Olympic Games, and when I came home to Louisville, I still got treated like a nigger. There were some restaurants I couldn't get served in. Some people kept calling me 'boy.'"⁴⁷ In fact, many in Louisville simply referred to Ali as the "Olympic nigger."⁴⁸ Ali secretly began frequenting mosques in pursuit of a defined mission to challenge racism in the United States. He later recalled, "I'd sneak into Nation of Islam meetings through the back door. I didn't want people to know I was there. I was afraid, if they knew, I wouldn't be allowed to fight for the title."⁴⁹ In the mosques he found a disciplined brotherhood that opposed forced integration and promoted black self-reliance through Islam. He heard Muslims ask the fundamental questions of why blacks were treated abhorrently in America and it motivated him to distance himself from the shackles of slavery.

⁴⁷ Ali quoted in Gregory, "Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone."

⁴⁸ Robert Lipsyte, "Muhammad Ali Dies at 74: Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century," *New York Times*, June 4, 2016, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/06/04/sports/muhammad-ali-dies.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur&referer=>.

⁴⁹ Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 97.

He prepared for the announcement of his religious conversion and name change after the biggest bout of his young career in February 1964 when he challenged Sonny Liston for the heavyweight championship in Miami. Ali made a spectacle leading up to the fight screaming that he was going to shock the world in a big upset to draw attention to himself in building the gate for the contest. His shouts of shocking the world were not farfetched. One ringside account had only three of fifty-eight people polled at the fight predict that Ali would win.⁵⁰ Jim Murray, the *Los Angeles Times* columnist, a skeptic of Ali's suggested, "It's widely believed that there are more people in the world who understand Einstein's Theory than think Cassius Clay has a chance."⁵¹ The popular comedian, Jackie Gleason, added in the *New York Post*, "I predict Sonny Liston will win in eighteen seconds of the first round, and my estimate includes the three seconds Blabber Mouth will bring into the ring with him."⁵² Followers of boxing were legitimately concerned for the safety of Ali. In the meantime, rumors were already circulating about his affiliation with the Nation of Islam, especially because Ali had been traveling with Malcolm X. The fight against Liston was the opportunity to let the world know of his conversion on the largest stage available.

Ali became world renowned in the twentieth century because of his overwhelming boxing prowess and unique verbal eloquence. Both of these elements were to be showcased in the Liston fight. He had a profound understanding of how to use his physical gifts to promote his image and to spread his objectives through charismatic

⁵⁰ Herb Nipson, "How Good Is Cassius Clay?," *Ebony*, April 1964, 77.

⁵¹ Jim Murray quoted in Roberts and Smith, *Blood Brothers*, 309.

⁵² Jackie Gleason quoted in Remnick, "American Hunger."

public displays. In essence, Ali used the medium that was thrust in front of him to electrify audiences. In February 1964, at twenty-two years old, on the eve of the first championship fight against Liston, Ali was so confident in himself that he brashly called out the media who were doubting him. He exclaimed, “It’s your last chance to get on the bandwagon. I’m keeping a list of all you people.”⁵³ In effect, Ali was ready to further his stamp on the world and he displayed his confidence by challenging the media to support him while he was still the underdog.

Ali prefaced the bout with an article for *Sports Illustrated* entitled, “I’m a Little Special.”⁵⁴ His contentious banter and showmanship were flaunted in the now mythical piece. The title offers direct insight into the cocksure attitude of the ascending boxer from Louisville. The article, as a whole, serves as an introduction to what the world came to know very well about Ali—that he was a brash and dynamic young African American who the magazine’s editors described as “a loudmouth and braggart.”⁵⁵ His unabashed self-praise and taunting of Liston astounded spectators who felt Ali had yet to prove himself. Liston was considered the most intimidating boxer of the era and was the clear favorite according to sportswriters. In typical fashion, however, Ali looked for every possible psychological advantage he could find against Liston.

Ali was impetuous throughout the time leading up to the fight against Liston. His words suggest he knows that if he wins it could be the beginning of an historic career, but

⁵³ Ali quoted in George Plimpton, “Miami Notebook: Cassius Clay and Malcolm X,” *Harper's Magazine*, June 1964, 55.

⁵⁴ Cassius Clay, “I’m a Little Special,” *Sports Illustrated*, February 24, 1964, 14-15.

⁵⁵ Clay, “I’m a Little Special,” 14.

they also suggest that if he loses he could just be considered a loudmouthed kid who was overtaken by a superior opponent in an overwhelming venue. For instance, before the Liston fight he stated, “If I were like a lot of guys—a lot of heavyweight boxers, I mean—I’ll bet you a dozen doughnuts you wouldn’t be reading this story right now. . . . Cassius Clay is a boxer who can throw the jive better than anybody you will probably ever meet anywhere.”⁵⁶ The cavalier attitude of Ali is evident right from the introduction, and only serves as validation to the magazine’s cover which featured Ali looking over the one million dollars he planned on earning in the fight against Liston. Ali continues by gushing “I don’t think it’s bragging to say I’m something a little special.”⁵⁷ His words are an example of his keen understanding of how to grip the public. He knew that whether they had a fondness for him or not, they would certainly be captivated by his approach.

Intensely self-aware, Ali was cognizant of his verbal gifts. He created an aura around himself that catapulted his notoriety. In fact, Ali believed that if he did not take advantage of his innate ability to draw attention through his words that he may have floundered in mediocrity: “Where do you think I would be next week if I didn’t know how to shout and holler and make the public sit up and take notice? I would be poor, for one thing, and I would probably be down in Louisville, Ky., my home town, washing windows or running an elevator and saying “yes suh” and “no suh” and knowing my place. Instead of that, I’m saying I’m one of the highest-paid athletes in the world, which

⁵⁶ Clay, “I’m a Little Special,” 14.

⁵⁷ Clay, “I’m a Little Special,” 14.

is true, and that I'm the greatest fighter in the world, which I hope and pray is true."⁵⁸ A close look at these sentiments suggests that Ali had an ardent understanding of where he was coming from and the plight suffered by African Americans throughout history. He was eager to distance himself from the common responses of "yes suh" and "no suh" and remove himself from the remnants of slavery. Indeed, the changing of his name from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali was motivated by leaving behind the family name that had been inherited from slave owners and to establish his own identity.

Ali also indicated that all of his criticism of Liston and the aggressive language he had used was a ploy to garner more interest in the fight. In his words, "Part of my plan to get the fight has made me say some pretty insulting things about Sonny Liston, but I might as well tell you I've done that mostly to get people to talking about the fight and to build up the gate."⁵⁹ It was a brilliant move on his part and another example of his awareness of public interests. Ali was a showman who was far ahead of his era in using the media to market sporting events into major entertainment. He was eager to amplify the level of interest in the fight by speaking out-of-turn as the underdog. In fact, it was almost unheard of for a young upstart like Ali to be boldly attacking Liston with verbal taunts. Undeniably, it galvanized those interested in sport and brought much attention to the fight.

There was a lot in the buildup to the Clay-Liston fight that can be considered a trial run for the rest of Ali's life. He had already achieved modest fame while gaining notoriety from his 1960 Olympic victory and his undefeated record, but this was his first

⁵⁸ Clay, "I'm a Little Special," 14.

⁵⁹ Clay, "I'm a Little Special," 14.

significant professional fight. Ali insisted on receiving an opportunity to challenge the champion by marketing the fight with all the energy he could muster while unabashedly testing the reaction of the public. Ali's emotional intelligence ascended him to the point where boxing promoters felt compelled to give him a chance at the title. He worked diligently for the bout, not just in the gym, but also through the media: ". . . I knew I wouldn't get the chance because nobody much had ever heard of me . . . [and] I realized I'd never get it just sitting around thinking about it. I knew I'd have to start talking about it—I mean really talking, screaming and yelling and acting like some kind of a nut."⁶⁰ *New York Times* columnist Robert Lipsyte reminisced, "Cassius Clay had no right to be in the ring with Sonny Liston. He had never beaten anybody of importance. He was untried."⁶¹ Clearly, there was a rationale behind Ali's antics and, inevitably, they resulted in his desired goal of challenging Liston. These sentiments allow for an opening into the mindset of Ali—he was aware that some may think that he was crazy and out of control, but the meaning behind his actions was to gain himself the desired notoriety that landed him a chance at the heavyweight title.

The overall sense that Ali conveyed in his last days before he embarked on the biggest fight of his career represented a confidence that came along with being twenty-two years old. It was not a hollow confidence, but one could certainly argue that there was a breath of naiveté in his words. Was Ali scared? He did show some timidity and was not as sure of himself as he was later in his career. That being said, he absolutely wanted to prove his doubters wrong, as he stated, "The only voices I hear, of course, are

⁶⁰ Clay, "I'm a Little Special," 15.

⁶¹ Robert Lipsyte quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

people telling me I can't do what I say."⁶² His desire to "shock the world" drove him to prepare relentlessly, while also still showing some signs of insecurity by covering for himself if he lost the fight: "I'm not too worried. I think I can make it in something else the same way I've made it in boxing. If things go wrong in the fight, I'll just wait a while. Summertime comes, flowers start blooming, little birds start flying and you wake up, get up and get out. You change with the times."⁶³

Ali's tacit fear of having to make it in "something else" did not have to be realized. He went on to defeat Liston in one of the greatest upsets in the history of sports. The fight was a reflection of what Ali had predicted. He was faster, quicker, and more youthful than the burly Liston. Ali seized the moment in the ring to speak to the world in what are likely the most famous words ever spoken by an athlete: "I am the greatest! I'm the greatest thing that ever lived! I don't have a mark on my face, and I upset Sonny Liston, and I just turned twenty-two years old. I must be the greatest! I told the world. I talked to God every day. . . . I shook up the world! I shook up the world! I am the king of the world! I'm pretty! I'm a bad man!"⁶⁴ The only way to truly appreciate the emotion and the greatness of that moment is to watch the film. Ali's victory changed the era because he used the triumph to become a world icon. Irish actor, Liam Neeson, remembered, "as I walked to school that morning, my feet didn't seem to touch the ground: my mind was an excited blur, because somehow the world had changed with that

⁶² Clay, "I'm a Little Special," 15.

⁶³ Clay, "I'm a Little Special," 15.

⁶⁴ Ali quoted in *Muhammad Ali: Through the Eyes of the World*, DVD.

victory.”⁶⁵ Ali took the victory to bring an unrivaled boldness to his generation. Understanding that he was not a traditional athlete of the 1960s, Ali embraced his uniqueness and took pride in doing things differently, especially in the way that he presented himself.

The morning after the fight Cassius Clay proclaimed that his new name was Muhammad Ali. Ali recalled years later, “It freed me from the identity given to my family by my slave masters.”⁶⁶ The name change scared people, both black and white, because the champion of the world was clearly not going to acquiesce to conventional standards. The name—Muhammad Ali—was loaded with a negative connotation because of the heated language used by the Black Muslims. Still, Ali snapped at a reporter who suggested he was joining a separatist hate group exclaiming, “I like everybody; I treat everybody right.”⁶⁷ According to Ali, he quickly went from an intriguing braggart to an evil man in white circles: “I got bad all of a sudden.”⁶⁸ Indeed, when Ali returned from Miami and was looking for a hero’s welcome in New York’s

⁶⁵ Liam Neeson quoted in Niall O’Dowd, “Exclusive: Liam Neeson on the Greatest of Them All, Muhammad Ali,” *Irish Central*, June 5, 2016, accessed June 27, 2016, <http://www.irishcentral.com/opinion/niallodowd/Exclusive-Liam-Neeson-on-the-greatest-of-them-all-Muhammad-Ali.html>.

⁶⁶ Ali quoted in Gregory, “Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone.”

⁶⁷ Ali quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

⁶⁸ Ali quoted in Thirteen WNET, “A Conversation with Muhammad Ali,” (1968), YouTube, September 6, 2012, accessed August 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3r56hv3jCU&feature=youtu.be&t=745>.

Madison Square Garden, he was greeted with overwhelming boos because he insisted on being introduced by his new name.⁶⁹

Members of the white media and black civil rights advocates refused to call him Muhammad Ali. Jimmy Cannon, the senior boxing sportswriter of the 1960s, lashed out at Ali for his connection to the Black Muslims: “this is the first time [boxing] has been turned into an instrument of hate. . . . as one of Elijah Muhammad’s missionaries, Clay is using it as a weapon of wickedness in an attack on the spirit. I pity Clay and abhor what he represents. . . . [The Nation of Islam] is a sect that deforms the beautiful purpose of religion . . . [It is a] more pernicious hate symbol than Schmeling and Nazism.”⁷⁰ Ali, however, was adamant about abandoning the slave name of Cassius Clay and using his new name to move into a future of social activism. Meanwhile, newspaper editors continued to discourage their writers from using the name Muhammad Ali. Ali was infuriated when interviewers addressed him as Cassius Clay; in one instance, he admonished a reporter, “I’m not Cassius . . . you wanna keep calling me a white man’s name. I’m not white. I don’t wanna be called by your name no more. I’m not no slave. I’m Muhammad Ali.”⁷¹ Furthermore, he boasted, “I believe in Allah and in peace . . . I was baptized when I was twelve, but I didn’t know what I was doing. I’m not a Christian anymore.”⁷² To be sure, at twenty-two years old, Ali had shocked the world and found

⁶⁹ Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 262.

⁷⁰ Jimmy Cannon quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 209-210.

⁷¹ Ali quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

⁷² Ali quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 207.

himself on a platform to impact millions. His intentions were clear: “I am America. I am the part you won’t recognize but get used to me. Black, confident, cocky. My name, not yours. My religion, not yours. My goals, my own. Get used to me.”⁷³

⁷³ Ali quoted in “‘Just the Greatest Boxer’: 11 Memorable Quotes from Boxing Legend Ali,” *RT International*, June 4, 2016, accessed June 27, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/345391-muhammad-ali-famous-quotes/>.

Chapter IV

The Nation of Islam: Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali

Ali's conversion to Islam was extremely controversial in the mainstream media but also a decision that made him an iconic figure. His new status as heavyweight champion of the world put his religious status at the forefront. Never before had the religion of a boxing champion been such a poignant subject, but Ali's connection to the Nation of Islam and its belligerent language brought him unmatched scrutiny. Ali, however, spoke vociferously about his new faith:

I ain't no Christian. I can't be, when I see all the colored people fighting for forced integration getting [blown] up. They get hit by stones and chewed by dogs, and they blow up a Negro church and don't find the killers. I get telephone calls every day. They want me to carry signs. They want me to picket. They tell me it would be a wonderful thing if I married a white woman because this would be good for brotherhood. I don't want to be washed down sewers. I just want to be happy with my own kind.⁷⁴

Ali became enamored with Islam in 1960 when a minister brought him to a mosque where he absorbed teachings that exposed the historic plight of African Americans; most pointedly, being stripped of their identity during the slave passage and being forced to assimilate to a white culture. Ali found his truth in the mosques and thus made his conversion rejecting the slave name that was thrust upon his family in generations past.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ali quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 208.

⁷⁵ Alex Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, ed. Murray Fisher (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 69.

It was either sheer luck or unparalleled foresight that Ali envisioned his conversion to give him transcendent status. He stated in 1964, “my change is one of the things that will mark me as a great man in history.”⁷⁶ To that end, Ali interwove peace and Islam from the beginning of his conversion amidst the militancy of the Black Muslims—a potential contradiction, but also a direct correlation to his core beliefs. He clearly stated his objection to inferences of an alignment with hate early in his conversion, “People brand us a hate group . . . That is not true. Followers of Allah are the sweetest people in the world . . . They pray five times a day . . . All they want to do is live in peace.”⁷⁷ As Ali grew and evolved, he became increasingly devoted to his faith.

In the months leading up to the Liston fight, Ali had forged a special friendship with Malcolm X. Malcolm X had been the primary ambassador of the Nation of Islam in the early 1960s and was assigned to Ali by the self-proclaimed prophet Elijah Muhammad. In his *Autobiography*, Malcolm X expressed a strong hatred for Liston and Patterson who had “white priests” in their camps as “spiritual advisors.”⁷⁸ He emphasized to Ali that the Liston fight represented more than just a championship title. Malcolm X told him the fight was about religion and the struggle of Muslims throughout mankind: “This fight is the truth. It’s the Cross and the Crescent fighting in a prize ring—for the first time. It’s a modern Crusades—a Christian and a Muslim facing each other with television to beam it off Telstar for the whole world to see what happens! Do

⁷⁶ Ali quoted in Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 71.

⁷⁷ Ali quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 208.

⁷⁸ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, ed. by Alex Haley (New York: Ballantine, 1973; Grove Press, 1991), 306.

you think Allah has brought about all this intending for you to leave the ring as anything but the champion?”⁷⁹ Ali took this call very seriously and wanted to ensure that he represented his adopted organization and its faith with integrity. Moreover, Malcolm X echoed how Ali was roaring during press conferences that it had been “prophesied” for him to be victorious.⁸⁰ Elijah Muhammad boastfully added a disdainful delight in his group’s newest member rising to the top of the boxing world after Ali’s victory over Liston: “The enemy wanted him to come out all blasted. They had said that Liston would tear up that pretty face of yours. But Allah and myself said, ‘no, no.’”⁸¹ It was evident that Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Ali made a spiritual connection to the victory over Liston.

Elijah Muhammad’s proselytization of Ali penetrated deeply. The Nation’s teaching made Ali question a lot of what he had pondered on race and religion as a youngster in Louisville. Shortly after his conversion, Ali remarked, “When I went to church on Sunday, I always asked my mother, ‘how come is everything white?’ I said, ‘why is Jesus white with blond hair and blue eyes? Angels were white.’ I knew something was wrong but I couldn’t pinpoint it.”⁸² As Ali ruminated over these piercing questions, many white Americans and the media intensified their ridicule of the new champion. The press hoped that Ali would be an agreeable champion like Joe Louis had been when he acquiesced to the expected role of an African-American hero in the 1930s

⁷⁹ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 306.

⁸⁰ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 306.

⁸¹ Elijah Muhammad quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

⁸² Ali quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

and 1940s. Ali, however, defied nearly every expectation. Salim Muwakkil, former editor of the Nation of Islam newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, reminisced, “It was an affront to many Americans that the heavyweight champion of the world would reject American identity and all that entailed for something as obscure and cultish as the Nation of Islam.”⁸³ Ali was unfazed and stayed determined in teaming with the Nation of Islam to challenge years of entrenched racism in America.

Ali’s understanding that boxing was merely a simple endeavor in comparison to the global phenomenon of religion contributed to his worldwide impact. The outlook placed on these aspects of his life was very much put into perspective in 1964: “The fact is that my being a Muslim moved me from the sports pages to the front pages. I’m a whole lot bigger man than I would be if I was just a champion prizefighter. Twenty-four hours a day I get offers—to tour somewhere overseas, to visit colleges, to make speeches. Places like Harvard and Tuskegee, television shows, interviews, recordings. I get letters from all over.”⁸⁴ Ali savored the interest being shown in him because it enabled him to impact the world far more than a traditional boxing champion like Patterson or Liston.

The growing social magnitude of Ali when he was only twenty-two years old in 1964 was unfathomable. John McDermott, a writer for *Life Magazine*, recognized that Ali’s greatness was only being introduced at that point, but sensed that “at a minimum, he is going to be one of the most controversial figures in the whole array of heavyweight champions.”⁸⁵ It was clear that Ali was not going to be just another champion. His stage

⁸³ Salim Muwakkil quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

⁸⁴ Ali quoted in Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 74-75.

⁸⁵ McDermott, “Champ 23,” 38.

was boxing, but the world came to know him not only as a champion in the ring; he was also to become a leading champion for racial and social justice to be revered throughout the world. The reverence, however, did not come without extreme criticism for his involvement with Elijah Muhammad's separatist Nation of Islam. The traditionalists in the media were relentless in their denigration of the new champion, sparking a cynical reaction from Malcolm X: "If he was white, they would be referring to him as the 'All-American boy.'"⁸⁶ Over time, however, Ali used his religious ethos and social standing to be inclusive by forging relationships and partnerships with people of all backgrounds and serving as a leader for humanitarian causes. Ali was destined for greatness. His beloved trainer, Angelo Dundee, put it sharply in 1964 when he stated, "working with Cassius and going along with him is like watching a beautiful movie and you are a witness to its making I never met anyone like him and I know I never will again."⁸⁷ Dundee stayed close to Ali throughout his career and his feelings were evident of a world that was to be enamored with Ali for the next half century as he became one of the most admired figures on the planet.

While Ali represented an intensity and rhetorical style that was uncommon for African Americans in the 1960s, his bitter rival Floyd Patterson was in tandem with Martin Luther King's nonviolent approach. Patterson espoused King's view that "a doctrine of black supremacy is as dangerous as a doctrine of white supremacy."⁸⁸ He symbolized the movement toward integration and attempted to use his boxing platform to

⁸⁶ Malcolm X quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

⁸⁷ Angelo Dundee quoted in McDermott, "Champ 23," 39.

⁸⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

promote good-spirited relations between blacks and whites; Ali, on the other hand, was not willing to take the slow route toward racial equality. He was eager to uncover the atrocities of Jim Crow racism and to expose those within the black race who were, in his opinion, acquiescing to white society, dubbing these individuals as “Uncle Toms.” Ali was ready to arouse the black community of America into active rebellion as he called out those who were merely carrying on with the present state of affairs: “Most black people in this country are mentally dead, and we don’t wake up easy. It takes something like an earthquake to wake up our people. Oh, maybe black folks will get upset about something and burn a building or two, but in a couple of days, we forget.”⁸⁹ His commonly heard refrain called for blacks to actively challenge racism instead of employing the tactics of passive resistance: “Why are we called Negroes? Why are we deaf, dumb, and blind? Why is everybody making progress, and yet we lag so far behind?”⁹⁰ Indeed, Ali frequently referred to Patterson as an “Uncle Tom” and did not accord him respect leading to a heated rivalry between the two fighters.

Less than a year after Ali defeated Liston in February 1964, Patterson penned an article with writer Milton Gross for *Sports Illustrated*, essentially demanding that he be given the opportunity to fight the champion. In his piece, “I Want to Destroy Clay,” Patterson attacks Ali on multiple fronts including his character. Patterson saw himself as the example of a more sophisticated African American than Ali and Liston. He subtly labeled Liston as a brutish, uneducated African American; moreover, he presented Ali as a brash, militant youngster who was unbecoming of a champion. For instance, Patterson

⁸⁹ Ali quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [22].

⁹⁰ Ali quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

references Liston's criminal history and Ali's association with the Black Muslims. Patterson refused to refer to the champion by the name Muhammad Ali—only as Cassius Clay—while proudly touting that he was a “life member” of the NAACP.⁹¹ His feelings were clear as he claimed to be above both Liston and Ali in his value to the African-American community: “[The NAACP] felt that if [Liston] became the champion he could bring discredit to the Negroes' position . . . and [Ali has] practically turned the title over to the Black Muslims. Because of that I can't respect him as a champion or as a man.”⁹² Patterson was adamant that it was his duty to wrest the title from the Black Muslims and return it to where an integrated community could take pride in its owner. This harsh language only exacerbated Ali's claim that Patterson was a pawn of the white community.

Patterson was so perturbed by the very existence of the Black Muslims that he denounced the whole organization by equating them to the Ku Klux Klan. In 1963, Patterson had openly stated, “I have no respect for the Black Muslims. They're a colored Ku Klux Klan.”⁹³ He argues that Ali was manipulated by the group resulting in an embarrassment to the black race. The motivation was so strong for Patterson to get the opportunity to fight Ali for a chance to regain the championship that he suggested, “Maybe the Black Muslims would repudiate him [and] it could be my small contribution

⁹¹ Floyd Patterson and Milton Gross, “I Want to Destroy Clay,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 19, 1964, 43.

⁹² Patterson, “I Want to Destroy Clay,” 43.

⁹³ Patterson quoted in Gilbert Rogin, “I Live with Myself,” *Sports Illustrated*, August 5, 1963, 27.

to civil rights.”⁹⁴ The rift between Patterson and Ali unmistakably went beyond the boxing ring; their rhetoric indicated their personal differences and how they felt about black America. In their two future matches in the ring, Ali embarrassed Patterson by dragging out the fights so that he could prolong the punishment while chastising him as an “Uncle Tom.” In a larger context, they were pioneering voices for the competing interests of the popular civil rights movement and the hostile rhetoric of Black Nationalism.

Prominent writer George Plimpton followed Ali closely throughout his career developing a strong relationship with him early in his conversion to Islam. He spent time with Ali shortly after his 1964 championship victory over Liston, and his infatuation with the boxer was evident early in his career. Plimpton was struck how the simplest of questions from reporters led to a spectacle: “[Ali would] unleash an act, an entertainment which included poetry . . . not a dull show by any standard, even if you’ve seen it a few times before.”⁹⁵ Ali’s ability to constantly entertain and impress when talking on weighty subjects like race and religion proliferated his impact on people everywhere he went. This innate gift allowed his words to resonate with diverse peoples in all parts of the world.

During Plimpton’s time in Miami covering the Liston fight, he had the opportunity to meet with Malcolm X for the first time. Malcolm X was part of the fighter’s entourage and, as previously mentioned, the rumors were heavy that Cassius Clay was in the midst of a conversion to the Nation of Islam and a name change to

⁹⁴ Patterson, “I Want to Destroy Clay,” 44.

⁹⁵ Plimpton, “Miami Notebook,” 54.

Muhammad Ali. Ali and Malcolm X were inseparable prior to the Liston fight. Ferdie Pacheco, Ali's physician, commented that "Malcolm X and Ali were like very close brothers. It was almost as if they were in love with each other."⁹⁶ Plimpton was immediately taken in his meeting with Malcolm X, seeing him as a "true revolutionary" who did not convey any hesitation in expressing his stances. In fact, Plimpton could not help but make the rhetorical parallel between the young fighter and the intellectual revolutionary: "neither of them ever stumbles over words, or ideas, or appears balked by a question, so that one rarely has the sense of the brain actually working but rather that it is engaged in rote, simply a recording apparatus playing back to an impulse."⁹⁷ The comparison to Malcolm X is an intriguing one as it is clear that Ali never wavered in his oratorical confidence. Ali was boisterous, but for a nontraditional intellectual he certainly was able to think on a more advanced level that challenged even the most academic to elucidate his ideas. Malcolm X, in fact, chided the idea of sport being a legitimate pursuit for a black man, calling it "the pleasure of the idle rich."⁹⁸ He was not engrossed with Ali as an athlete; he was instead wholly impressed with him as a thinker: "I'm interested in him as a human being. Not many people know the quality of the mind he's got in there . . . with as much untapped mental energy as he has physical power. He should be a diplomat."⁹⁹ The shrewdness of this statement in 1964 is beyond intuitive

⁹⁶ Ferdie Pacheco quoted in Roberts and Smith, *Blood Brothers*, ix.

⁹⁷ Plimpton, "Miami Notebook," 57.

⁹⁸ Malcolm X quoted in Plimpton, "Miami Notebook," 58.

⁹⁹ Malcolm X quoted in Plimpton, "Miami Notebook," 58.

given the humanitarian impact that Ali was to have on the world over the next fifty years, including numerous meetings with heads of state later in his life.

When Plimpton asked Malcolm X if he was teaching Ali to have a militant Islamic mindset, Malcolm X quickly responded: “He will make up his own mind,” careful to make clear that Ali was an independent thinker who could evolve according to his core values and the contemporary issues of his life.¹⁰⁰ That being said, even before Malcolm X softened his stance on race issues, he emphasized in a 1963 interview the fundamental core values of the Nation of Islam as being more moderate: “Freedom, justice and equality are our principal ambitions.”¹⁰¹ To that end, Ali never truly felt comfortable with discourse that portrayed whites as devils; however, Malcolm X and Nation of Islam superiors understood the value Ali had to their movement and used him to further their cause. Two days after the Liston fight, for instance, Malcolm X interrupted Ali in a press conference to defend his conversion: “[Ali] will mean more to his people than any athlete before him. He’s more than Jackie Robinson was, because Robinson is the white man’s hero. But Cassius is the black man’s hero. Do you know why? Because the white press wanted him to lose. They wanted him to lose because he is a Muslim. You notice nobody cares about the religion of other athletes.”¹⁰² Ali acquiesced to the party line of the Nation of Islam, but he was at heart a person who universally accepted the people of the world. Ali yearned for peace. He simply believed that involuntary integration was not the answer to solving America’s race problems: “We

¹⁰⁰ Malcolm X quoted in Plimpton, “Miami Notebook,” 59.

¹⁰¹ Malcolm X quoted in Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 22.

¹⁰² Malcolm X quoted in Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 253.

don't believe in forcing ourselves on white people. . . . we don't hate white people; we know white people. We know the history of white people.”¹⁰³ Unfortunately, Ali was a product of the racial muddling of the 1950s and 1960s and believed that change would come from explicit confrontation. Hence, Ali openly combatted racism with aggressive language early in his public life; however, he personified open-mindedness which was to be reflected in his positions when the turbulence of the 1960s subsided.

Ali and Malcolm X spent several days together after the Liston fight. Malcolm X imparted his knowledge of the Quran on Ali and continued his education on matters concerning race and the Nation of Islam. They drove from Miami to New York and along the way experienced the hassle of trying to get a meal in the Deep South. Ali commented on the experience in his standard poetic form: “Man, it was really a letdown drag/For all those miles I had to eat out of a bag.”¹⁰⁴ Upon arriving in New York, the two friends went for a walk in Times Square after dinner. Ali was impressed with Malcolm X's popularity, as he told reporters, “Malcolm X got more requests for his autograph than I did. *He's* the greatest.”¹⁰⁵ Likewise, Malcolm X had profound admiration for the champion: “He is in a better position than anyone else to restore the racial pride to not only our people in this country, but all over the world.”¹⁰⁶ They continued their time together that week with a visit to the United Nations where Ali drew major attention with

¹⁰³ Ali quoted in Thirteen WNET, “A Conversation with Muhammad Ali.”

¹⁰⁴ Ali quoted in Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 254.

¹⁰⁵ Ali quoted in Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 254.

¹⁰⁶ Malcolm X quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

his dramatic claim that he was king of the world. Foreign diplomats and American representatives expressed a combination of chagrin and intrigue for the upstart.¹⁰⁷

The trip to the United Nations marked the regrettable end of Malcolm X's accompaniment and mentorship to Ali because he was embroiled in a simultaneous split with Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad. In short order, Elijah Muhammad dismissed Malcolm X from the Nation of Islam and swept the compelled Ali into an unyielding loyalty to the sect; thus, fracturing the relationship with his mentor.¹⁰⁸ The rift between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad quickly turned ominous. Malcolm X, in fact, cautioned just weeks before his assassination, "Elijah Muhammad called all of his officials . . . to Chicago in October [1964], and ordered them to kill or maim any of his followers who leave him to follow me."¹⁰⁹ The unsolved assassination, widely believed to have been carried out by the Nation of Islam, took place on February 21, 1965. Ali publicly expressed his support for the Nation of Islam, but he was privately in fear because of his association to Malcolm X and the Muslims. He could not express the remorse that he felt for his estranged friend. Even Ali's mother, Odessa Clay, spoke out after the assassination because she feared for her son: "I fear for his life because the condition the world is in today. . . . you never know what's going to happen when you're in public life like he is. . . . And I do wish that he would withdraw from this movement because I am also worried about him. We raised him to be a Christian. . . . he got out into the world on his own and then he got into this organization, which we do not approve of

¹⁰⁷ Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 254.

¹⁰⁸ Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 254-255.

¹⁰⁹ Malcolm X quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

at all.”¹¹⁰ Ali was still only twenty-three years old at the time of Malcolm X’s death and the influence that Elijah Muhammad had on him at that time was unwavering. Consequently, he maintained his commitment to the Nation of Islam, but he did not endorse violence. Ali’s emphasis continued to be on challenging a racist system by stressing the need for black independence and self-reliance.

The controversy over Ali’s joining the Nation of Islam was felt throughout both black and white communities. After all, the Nation of Islam represented militancy, as Elijah Muhammad spoke furiously about his desire for separation of the races. White Americans understandably took umbrage with being called the “devil” by Black Muslims, but even the mainstream black community found the positions of the Nation of Islam to be disturbingly in contrast with the momentum of the civil rights movement. Ali, however, was an evolving figure and continued to surround himself with a diverse group of people and ingratiated himself with blacks and whites from all over the world. For instance, Julian Bond, the civil rights leader and future politician reflected positively on Ali’s joining the Nation of Islam, “The act of joining was not something many of us particularly liked. But the notion he’d do it; that he’d jump out there, join this group that was so despised by mainstream America, and be proud of it, sent a little thrill through you.”¹¹¹ Many African Americans had similar feelings as well-known black journalist Jill Nelson expressed,

We weren’t about to join the Nation, but we loved Ali for that supreme act of defiance. It was the defiance against having to be the good Negro, the good Christian waiting to be rewarded by the righteous white provider. We loved Ali

¹¹⁰ Odessa Clay quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

¹¹¹ Julian Bond quoted in Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute to the Greatest* (New York: Pegasus, 2016), 8.

because he was so beautiful and powerful and because he talked a lot of lip. But he also epitomized a lot of black people's emotions at the time, our anger, our sense of entitlement, the need to be better just to get to the median, the sense of standing up against the furies.¹¹²

Ali provided hope and gave a refreshed confidence to people in the black community who were feeling stagnant in the slow application and enforcement of the landmark civil rights legislation and judicial decisions of the 1950s and 60s. In short, his words and actions were new and bold.

¹¹² Jill Nelson quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 212.

Chapter V

The Champion of Social Justice

Ali's predecessor to the title of most famous black athlete in America was Jackie Robinson. Robinson had endured relentless racism when he broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball in 1947, achieving legendary status for being a trailblazer in the face of dreadful oppression. In March 1964, Robinson spoke impartially in his justification of Ali's alignment with the Nation of Islam. Robinson, himself, was united with the civil rights movement but appreciated what Ali brought to the black masses, as he stated, "Despite his loudness—and sometimes crudeness . . . he has also spread the message that more of us need to know: 'I am the greatest.' . . . I am not advocating that Negroes think they are greater than anyone else. But I want them to know that they are just as great as other human beings."¹¹³ When Robinson, along with other notable African Americans, began to cautiously embrace Ali's sentiments, it became more commonplace for the high profile blacks of the era to latch onto his message.

Many African-American athletes of the 1960s saw Ali as a catalyst to encourage change. Harry Edwards, the noted sociologist from the University of California, Berkeley, led a movement of athletes who came together in an effort to use their standing to challenge racism. Edwards, then at San Jose State, helped organize African-American Olympians before the 1968 Mexico City Games. Notably, Tommie Smith and John Carlos held their fists up in the air with black gloves in what was a reference to "Black

¹¹³ Jackie Robinson quoted in Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, 44.

Power.” Along with Edwards, it was Ali who gave these athletes the confidence to make such a political statement. Stokely Carmichael commented, “I want to let the whole world know that we are going to pick our heroes from today on, and Brother Tommie Smith, Brother John Carlos joins the rank of Brother Muhammad Ali because we want black people who are concerned with us first, and sports second.”¹¹⁴ Still, there were renowned athletes who chose to take a completely different approach. In 1968, Edwards had reached out to recent Heisman Trophy winner O.J. Simpson to help get behind the movement. Simpson attended traditionally conservative University of Southern California and had established himself as a football star who was accepted in white circles. When Simpson was approached, he infamously expressed the following sentiment, according to Edwards: “I’m not black; I’m O.J.”¹¹⁵ Simpson’s outlook is the epitome of what Ali felt was holding blacks back during an era in which he believed activism instead of acquiescing to the powerful white establishment was necessary.

Jim Brown, the great athlete and actor, felt similarly as he saw the Nation of Islam as a medium to expose the racism of white America. Brown did not convert his faith like Ali, but articulated that the Black Muslims did an excellent job of revealing the emotional state of blacks: “I respect the organization for instilling black people with pride in their race and for teaching black people to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and take care of their own.”¹¹⁶ Brown contended that the white media tainted the Black Muslims

¹¹⁴ Stokely Carmichael quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

¹¹⁵ Harry Edwards quoted in *O.J.: A Study in Black and White*, by Marcia Smith (HBO, 2002), DVD.

¹¹⁶ Jim Brown quoted in Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 339.

because of white America's own discomfort of acknowledging its racist tendencies. While there was much disdain toward the Nation of Islam in the 1960s, historical revisionists often look at the role that Ali played for black advancement through the platform of the Black Muslims to have enhanced the cause of the civil rights movement.

Ali provided an implicit advocacy for the civil rights movement even in the early days of his loyalty to Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Despite Ali's open criticism of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. and his followers found him to be a guide to furthering their cause. Ali later reflected, "I had respect for Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders, but I was taking a different road."¹¹⁷ Bryant Gumbel, the highly acclaimed journalist who eulogized Ali in 2016, was a young African American who felt the value of the civil rights movement. Gumbel found the deep connection between Ali and the civil rights movement, conveying in a 1996 interview, "One of the reasons the civil rights movement went forward was that black people were able to overcome their fear. And I honestly believe that, for many black Americans, that came from watching Muhammad Ali. He simply refused to be afraid. And being that way, he gave other people courage."¹¹⁸ Ali gave courage to people sitting-in, standing-up, and marching-on to continue their fight for justice. His reach stretched to people—black and white—who did not have much in common with the Black Muslims, but who shared his contempt for injustice and inequality.

Ali wanted to be amongst his black brethren when he could be; thus, he took his home in Harlem after the first Liston fight so that he could live with fellow African

¹¹⁷ Ali quoted in Gregory, "Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone."

¹¹⁸ Bryant Gumbel quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute*, 8-9.

Americans. He mocked Patterson for choosing to move his family to a predominant upper-middle class white suburb in New York in an attempt for integration. Ali's effort did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries in New York. Gil Noble, the popular black journalist, recalled that Ali was a huge source of pride during the stressful era of the 1960s:

Everybody was plugged into this man, because he was taking on America. There had never been anybody in his position who directly addressed himself to racism. Racism was virulent, but you didn't talk about those things. If you wanted to make it in this country, you had to be quiet, carry yourself in a certain way, and not say anything about what was going on, even though there was a knife sticking in your chest. Ali changed all of that. He just laid it out and talked about racism and slavery and all of that stuff. He put it on the table. And everybody who was black, whether they said it overtly or covertly, said 'Amen.'¹¹⁹

The feelings that Noble expressed about Ali's role in the life of African Americans were felt widely. People from all corners of America were beginning to latch onto the confidence and hope that came from the young champion during a profound time of disorder and change.

Ali's influence on Americans stretched from the inner city to the elite corners of the country's socioeconomic scale. Jeremy Hubball, a young white student at Groton School in Groton, Massachusetts, became enamored with Ali shortly before his graduation from the school in 1965. Groton, a prep school, borne of America's elite like Franklin Delano Roosevelt was built on a system of British aristocracy stressing gentility and sportsmanship. When the young Hubball observed Ali's first victory over Liston in 1964, he could not help but be taken by the brashness of the boxer: "Here was a smart, irreverent black man who dared to be defiant. Beyond any grudging respect, he demanded our attention, but he was not welcomed by civil rights leaders, who chose to

¹¹⁹ Gil Noble quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute*, 9.

distance themselves from his flamboyant and polarizing posture. [He was an] unlikely [character] to intrude on Groton.”¹²⁰ Ali’s intrusion on Groton was representative of his larger imposition on America, in both black and white communities. His rhetoric was compelling and became more emphatic as his confidence grew with his success in the ring. Educated whites across income brackets were taking notice of Ali and did not yet know what to make of him.

This was especially perplexing for schoolboys like Hubball who were tucked away in a privileged educational environment where traditional white superiority was the standard. Hubball acknowledged that “an inevitable smugness, condescension, and noblesse oblige permeated our world view.”¹²¹ Many students had been gripped in February 1963 when Martin Luther King, Jr. came to speak at Groton. King was honored to speak at what he referred to as an “historic institution of learning.”¹²² His representation of the African-American struggle was more acceptable to the traditional Groton boy who was interested in the idealism of social justice, whereas many in the community saw Ali’s style and rhetoric as threatening.

In May 1965, just days before his high school graduation, Hubball was invited into the study of the veteran headmaster, Reverend Jack Crocker, to listen to the second Ali-Liston fight on the radio. Crocker, who was an advocate for civil rights, had a

¹²⁰ Jeremy J.M. Hubball, “The Headmaster, The Fighter, and Me,” *Groton School: The Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 27.

¹²¹ Hubball, “The Headmaster,” 29.

¹²² Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in “MLK’s Speech at Groton,” MLK’s Speech at Groton, accessed June 26, 2016, <http://www.groton.org/page/About/MLKs-Speech-at-Groton>.

patrician-like presence on the Episcopal school and spoke of “muscular Christianity” to his pupils, which left Hubball with a nervous excitement as they gathered by the radio. The fight did not go beyond one round as Ali won quickly. Hubball was overjoyed but fearful of expressing his enthusiasm in front of his revered old-style headmaster: “I found myself surprisingly elated by the outcome. To a sheltered teenager, Ali brought something electrifying—the hint of a new kind of danger, tinged with promise—and his charisma was undeniable. Still, it was hard to reconcile Ali’s youthful appeal with his offensive behavior, so out of tune with our good-taste sensibilities. At Groton, mischief, bravado, and especially disobedience were not tolerated.”¹²³ Ali represented the future to Hubball. Change was coming to his generation and Ali enabled that transformation for a future toward social justice. Blacks and whites took the momentum that Ali presented for this cause and brought their energy to college campuses and cities across America.

In the tumult of the 1960s there were questions from the old guard of the World War II generation of what the braggadocio that came with Ali meant. Was he a mark of buffoonery or was he a symbol of originality? What kind of change did he represent? Either way his combination of humor and brashness left the new generation captivated. Blacks were proud that someone stood up for them with such passion; whites teetered with excitement as he represented the change that many liberals wanted to see. Ali historian, Randy Roberts, was one of these young white men who became smitten with the activist and considered him “the unofficial spokesman of my generation.”¹²⁴ The utter thought that someone as openly defiant as Ali could be seen as the icon of the era by

¹²³ Hubball, “The Headmaster,” 31.

¹²⁴ Roberts, “Muhammad Ali Center,” 177.

whites was inconceivable; however, it was a reflection of what Ali could inspire in others with his unique passion and powerful rhetoric. Hope and confidence for the change that people wanted to see were epitomized by Ali.

Ali boosted his notoriety dramatically during the interim of his two fights with Liston between February 1964 and March 1965. His global reputation grew rapidly upon becoming champion, as he voiced his opinions on social issues, and promoted his new faith. Ali understood that his conversion to Islam ingratiated him with Muslims all over the world: “Now that [Elijah Muhammad] gave me the beautiful name of Muhammad Ali and took away that slave name of Cassius Clay. Now I can go all over the world! All over the world!”¹²⁵ Using his boxing title as a podium, Ali took to the world’s stage by traveling widely to meet state leaders and interact with the masses in several countries to discuss freedom, justice, and equality.

Ali had achieved modest fame in 1960 when he won a gold medal in the Rome Olympics. Thus, he had already established himself as a loudmouth who did not shy from the public arena. By 1964, however, he was known all over the world. Ali took his new notoriety and transformed himself into an international ambassador traveling throughout Africa and the Middle East for five weeks to meet with his admirers.¹²⁶ Ali—boxing champion and social philosopher—was received with enthusiastic crowds on every stop and was treated as if he were beyond celebrity status.

The scenes in Africa were particularly prolific. Overwhelming crowds mobbed Ali in Ghana, Nigeria, and Egypt. One massive banner in Egypt read: “The Arab Boxing

¹²⁵ Ali quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

¹²⁶ Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 47.

Union Welcomes The Hero Mohammed Aly Clay.”¹²⁷ Another sign in Nigeria proclaimed, “Welcome Back Home Mohammed Ali King of the World.”¹²⁸ Poet Maya Angelou was amongst a group of African-American expatriates living in Ghana. She was stunned by the reception that Ali received when he visited: “When he came to Ghana, he came to my house. And the people had jammed into the street and we could hardly eat and hear ourselves talk because the Ghanaians had filled up the streets and were shouting, ‘Ali, the Greatest! Muhammad Ali the Greatest! The Greatest!’”¹²⁹ Ali enthusiastically professed to the Ghanaians, “I am an African, and my proper name is Muhammad Ali. There is greater dignity in my new name.”¹³⁰ This trip served as a major foundation for his world renown that enamored citizens globally for the next half century. Ali relished the idolatry: “I was welcomed like a king on my tour of Africa and the Middle East. I’m the first world champion that ever toured the world that he is a champion of.”¹³¹ Ali’s long excursion across the Atlantic Ocean enlightened him and validated his decision to embrace Islam.

The young Ali did not envision the extent to which he elicited excitement in Africa and Asia. Ali expressed awe in his reception: “Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan,

¹²⁷ *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

¹²⁸ Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith, “The King of the World: When Cassius Clay Became Muhammad Ali,” *Slate Magazine*, June 4, 2016, accessed Aug. 13, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports_nut/2016/06/when_cassius_clay_became_muhammad_ali_an_excerpt_from_the_book_blood_brothers.html.

¹²⁹ Maya Angelou quoted in *Muhammad Ali: Through the Eyes of the World*, DVD.

¹³⁰ Ali quoted in Roberts and Smith, “The King of the World.”

¹³¹ Ali quoted in Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 75.

Turkey—they called me their champion too. I was surprised. The whole world was watching.”¹³² He clearly was moved by the magnitude of his celebrity as he told Robert Lipsyte of the *New York Times* in late June 1964: “I was treated like a politician. Sometimes it scares me, all this fame, the world watches me, little children know me, old ladies. Gotta set an example of good living, everybody knows me. You should have seen them pour out of the hills, the villages of Africa, and they all knew me. Everybody knows me in the whole world.”¹³³ Indeed, his estranged friend, Malcolm X, had reached out to Ali via telegram to offer advice on his trip to Africa and Asia because of the immense symbolic importance. Malcolm X relayed to Ali, “Because a billion of our people in Africa, Arabia, and Asia love you blindly, you must now be forever aware of your tremendous responsibilities to them. You must never say or do anything that will permit your enemies to distort the beautiful image you have here among our people.”¹³⁴ This was advice that Ali carried with him for the rest of his life as he took on the role of a social and cultural leader for people throughout the world.

Ali embraced the history and culture of Africa and felt proud to be black with an eagerness to bring his African pride back to America to combat the shame of slavery.¹³⁵ The trip enhanced his cultural awareness and he returned with an increased pride in his new name: “Muhammad Ali is in Africa, all over Africa. The name is in Ethiopia, Morocco, Syria, Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, Algiers, Saudi Arabia. . . . Muhammad is

¹³² Ali quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

¹³³ Ali quoted in Roberts and Smith, *Blood Brothers*, 259.

¹³⁴ Malcolm X quoted in Roberts and Smith, “The King of the World.”

¹³⁵ Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 76.

the most common name in the world.”¹³⁶ Ali savored these opportunities to build new relationships leaving in his wake millions of devotees with every stop. Upon his return to New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport, Ali bragged, “People have been mobbing me. They’ve been killing me. Women and children were jumping off roofs, and people were coming straight out of the mountains to see me.”¹³⁷ The trip inevitably proved to be an exponential investment on his global impact and for his legacy.

Ali spoke with grace and confidence everywhere he visited in 1964 as the new world champion. He had the gift of drawing a crowd and naturally put it to use: “I been attracting attention ever since I been able to walk and talk.”¹³⁸ This attention found its way to Ali in the form of poetry, something that he had begun to use during his amateur days in Louisville in the 1950s when he told a reporter before a fight, “This guy must be done/I’ll stop him in one.”¹³⁹ As he became a professional, he realized that the talking and poetry irritated his opponents so it developed into a natural part of his repertoire. There may be no quantifiable research to suggest that Ali is the most quoted poet in history, but he is widely regarded as one of the most famous people in the world and he certainly wrote and spouted poetry. Ali spoke of his poetry in an October 1964 interview with Alex Haley of *Playboy*: “I bet my poetry gets printed and quoted more than any that’s turned out by the poem writers that them critics like. I don’t pay no attention to no kind of critics about nothing. If they knew as much as they claim to about what they’re

¹³⁶ Ali quoted in Roberts and Smith, “The King of the World.”

¹³⁷ Ali quoted in Roberts and Smith, “The King of the World.”

¹³⁸ Ali quoted in Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 48.

¹³⁹ Ali quoted in Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 49.

criticizing, they ought to be doing that instead of just standing on the side lines using their mouth.”¹⁴⁰ The audacity of Ali to make this claim as a twenty-two year old in 1964 is almost inexplicable, but he had the remarkable foresight to know that his words would resonate far beyond a singular era.

Ali began early in his career with hyperbolic rhetoric and colloquial poetry. Poetry helped him develop into a compelling speaker that positioned him to be an authoritative voice on substantial social issues. Prior to fighting Liston in 1964, for example, Ali used playful poetry to instigate his opponent:

Clay comes out to meet Liston and Liston starts to retreat,
If Liston goes back an inch farther he'll end up in a ringside seat.
Clay swings with his left, Clay swings with his right,
Look at young Cassius carry the fight
Liston keeps backing, but there's not enough room,
It's a matter of time till Clay lowers the boom.
Now Clay lands with a right, what a beautiful swing,
And the punch raises the Bear clean out of the ring.
Liston is still rising and the ref wears a frown,
For he can't start counting till Sonny goes down.
Now Liston is disappearing from view, the crowd is going frantic,
But radar stations have picked him up, somewhere over the Atlantic.
Who would have thought when they came to the fight?
That they'd witness the launching of a human satellite.
Yes the crowd did not dream, when they put up the money,
That they would see a total eclipse of the Sonny.¹⁴¹

The amateurism evident in his wordsmithing did not preclude him from being widely reported and quoted as stated in his aforementioned claim that he was the most cited poet of his era. Renowned and controversial poet, LeRoi Jones, who published broadly during

¹⁴⁰ Ali quoted in Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 50.

¹⁴¹ Ali quoted in Cindy Boren, ““Wait till You See Muhammad Ali’: A Look Back at the Boxing Great’s Way with Words,” *Washington Post*, June 4, 2016, accessed June 26, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2016/06/04/muhammad-ali-poetry/>.

the twentieth century noted in 1964 that when it came to literary genius, “Clay is not a fake, and even his blustering and playground poetry are valid; they demonstrate that a new and more complicated generation has moved on the scene.”¹⁴² Further, Bud Collins of the *Boston Globe* offered in 1968 that Ali might have been “the greatest poet since Robert Frost.”¹⁴³ The taunting of opponents was merely rhetorical practice for the verbal brilliance that Ali displayed during the balance of his career in the public eye.

There were also poignant moments when Ali eloquently combined insightful humor with a powerful message. He particularly enjoyed doing so to elevate black pride for African Americans. This pride that he displayed is what buoyed millions who saw him as a leader in social justice. During his exile from boxing, for example, Ali was asked to speak numerous times in sending college graduates off on their commencements. On one such occasion, Ali accentuated the beauty of blackness:

I’m not just saying black is best because I’m black. I can prove it. If you want some rich dirt, you look for the black dirt. If you want the best bread, you want the whole wheat rye bread. Costs more money, but it’s better for your digestive system. You want the best sugar for cooking; it’s the brown sugar. The blacker the berry, the sweeter the fruit. If I want a strong cup of coffee, I’ll take it black. The coffee gets weak if I integrate it with white cream.¹⁴⁴

These words to college graduates are a telling example of a brilliant oratorical mechanism that Ali used: the combination of humor and message. It is a profound illustration of why so many young blacks were enamored with him and found their pride through his example. Moreover, he could take the message above and seamlessly reverse

¹⁴² LeRoi Jones, “In the Ring,” *The Nation*, June 29, 1964, 662.

¹⁴³ Bud Collins quoted in Thirteen WNET, “A Conversation with Muhammad Ali.”

¹⁴⁴ Ali quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute*, 8.

black and white to emphasize that a “brainwashing” had taken place for hundreds of years to make people believe that white was superior to black as he does in the following address:

Everything good is supposed to be white. We look at Jesus, and we see a white with blond hair and blue eyes. Now, I’m sure there’s a heaven in the sky and colored folks die and go to heaven. Where are the colored angels? They must be in the kitchen preparing milk and honey. We look at Miss America, we see white. We look at Miss World, we see white. We look at Miss Universe, we see white. Even Tarzan, the king of the jungle in black Africa, he’s white. White Owl Cigars. White Swan soap. White Cloud tissue paper, White Rain hair rinse, White Tornado floor wax. All the good cowboys ride the white horses and wear white hats. Angel food cake is the white cake, but the [devil’s] food cake is chocolate. When are we going to wake up as a people and end the lie that white is better than black?¹⁴⁵

The profundity of Ali’s rhetoric here and through the course of his life gave millions a source of pride. Blacks all over America were inspired by Ali’s words—he was original and he was not scared to be a pioneer for black advancement. Ali’s white doctor, Ferdie Pacheco, was especially taken by Ali’s ability to inspire and change the perception of how America viewed being black:

Blacks were considered subhuman—hard word for me to say, but that’s what they were. In the South especially. That’s where Ali’s from, in the South. He comes along and by dint of his athletic ability, his graciousness, his funniness, his personality, and this incredibly good-looking body and face, he says to the camera, ‘Black is beautiful. Look at me. I’m prettier than anybody in Hollywood . . . and I’m black.’ . . . By the time he got through, he had defused the idea that black was ugly. ‘You don’t have to worry about being black. Black is beautiful.’ And in that context alone, if you didn’t look at anything else, he was just as big as Martin Luther King, or anybody else, ‘cause he got black people thinking that they were good, nay, that they were better.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Ali quoted in Gregory, “Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone.”

¹⁴⁶ Ferdie Pacheco quoted in John C. Walter and Malina Iida, “Muhammad Ali: Exemplar to the World,” American Studies Resource Centre, March 6, 2014, accessed June 26, 2016, <https://americanstudiesrc.wordpress.com/vol-14-2007/muhammad-ali-exemplar-to-the-world/>.

Ali's capacity to change how a whole race was viewed is astounding. The feeling that he, alone, changed the perception of being black was not felt by a singular pocket of America; it was felt by a plurality of Americans and people throughout the world. In sum, Ali formed his own niche on the intellectual continuum of black thinkers amidst the peak of the more traditional rhetoric of Martin Luther King.

Unmistakably, Ali used his platform to promote social causes, and his conversion to Islam set a tone for religious freedom throughout America. In 1964, when the National Boxing Association threatened to revoke his title because of his membership in the Nation of Islam, Ali was appalled and cited the principles of religious freedom in America: "Ain't this country supposed to be where every man can have the religion he wants, even no religion if that's what he wants?"¹⁴⁷ Ali's conviction about this freedom meant more to him than having the opportunity to fight. He illuminated his belief that he would quit fighting altogether if he had to choose between religion and sport. It was evident to him that he was fighting a more significant battle outside the ring than inside: "I made up my mind that I could give up fighting and never look back. . . . Me being the world heavyweight champion feels very small and cheap to me when I put that alongside how millions of my poor black brothers and sisters are having to struggle just get their human rights here in America. Maybe God got me here for a sacrifice. I don't know. But I do know that God don't want me to go down for standing up."¹⁴⁸ This powerful statement epitomized where Ali's interests truly laid, and represented his sincere drive for

¹⁴⁷ Ali quoted in Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 69.

¹⁴⁸ Ali quoted in Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 69.

social justice. In short, by the mid-1960s, Ali had set the foundation for a lifetime of public advocacy and uniting people across the globe.

The enlightenment of Ali was evident even during the era when Ali was under the influence of the pro-separatist Elijah Muhammad. For example, Ali expressed his more liberal views on integration in a 1967 interview with Thomas Hauser: “I would like to see peace on earth. If separation will bring it, I say let’s separate. If integration will bring it, I say let’s integrate. But let’s not just stand still, where one man holds another in bondage and deprives him of freedom, justice, and equality, neither integrating or letting him go to self. I don’t like that. But I like seeing peace, whatever means will bring it.”¹⁴⁹ The context of Ali’s words are strikingly reflective of Abraham Lincoln’s rhetoric. While Lincoln spoke about physical slavery, Ali was speaking about emotional bondage. Both men, however, yearned for a peaceful society where freedom, justice, and equality were the pillars. It was clear during Lincoln’s era that the country could not sustain itself half-slave and half-free. Thomas Jefferson had predicted it years earlier lamenting that slavery would be the “rock upon which the old Union would split.”¹⁵⁰ Just like Ali maintained that he would do whatever it took for peace, whether it was to integrate or separate, Lincoln had argued for essentially the same thing a century prior when he wrote to Horace Greeley, “If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing

¹⁴⁹ Ali quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute*, 96.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Jefferson quoted in Alexander Hamilton Stephens, “Slavery the Cornerstone,” in *An American Harvest: Readings in American History*, ed. J.R. Conlin and C.H. Peterson, vol. 1 (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 159.

some and leaving others alone I would also do that.”¹⁵¹ In effect, Ali’s feelings coincided with Lincoln’s in that he was willing to work vigorously for peace and justice. Ali implicitly understood that post-slavery division in America in the 1960s was akin to the antebellum era when Lincoln famously declared, “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.”¹⁵² At his core, Ali longed for a society that was free of injustice and was open to working with all races. The humanitarian in Ali can be found at nearly every moment in his public life; it is found here even in the midst of the unbridled antagonism that permeated the Nation of Islam in the heart of the chaotic 1960s.

Hauser, Ali’s chief biographer and close friend, noted that Ali evolved with the changes of his generation. The author points to Ali not having a fixed mentality on social issues: “As the 1960s grew more tumultuous, Ali became a lightning rod for dissent in America. His message of black pride and black resistance to white domination was on the cutting edge of the era. Not everything he preached was wise, and Ali himself now rejects some of the beliefs that he adhered to then.”¹⁵³ The volatility of the south during the 1950s and 1960s was embedded into Ali’s makeup. He was undeniably a product of the segregated South having been raised in the confines of Jim Crow Kentucky. Once Ali became well-traveled upon moving up the ranks in the boxing world he continued to see

¹⁵¹ Abraham Lincoln, “Letter to Horace Greeley,” in *The Portable Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Andrew Delbanco (New York: Penguin, 1992), 240.

¹⁵² Abraham Lincoln, “A House Divided,” in *An American Harvest: Readings in American History*, ed. J.R. Conlin and C.H. Peterson, vol. 1 (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 151.

¹⁵³ Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute*, 5.

the harshness of race issues in America. He strongly felt that explicitly confronting racism—without the passivity of the civil rights movement—was the most optimal approach to progress. In so doing, it was clear from Ali’s rhetoric that he did not totally value the jargon that Elijah Muhammad preached about all white people being devils.

Ali’s comments in a May 1965 interview with Jack Olsen of *Sports Illustrated* are a more practical depiction of where he stood:

You got to love your own kind. I just love my people and their children. I hug little Negro children when they come around the yard. They’re so humble and sweet and they don’t bother nobody. They don’t have a future, and nobody really teaches ‘em the truth. I couldn’t feel the same way about a white child, ‘cause he’s not my kind, and then later when he gets bigger he’ll have to turn away from me or else give up everything he’s got, just to be with some poor Negro. He’s got brothers and sisters and friends that’d condemn him for being with me. Kennedy got killed. Lincoln got killed. They mean right, but they were surrounded by the other whites.¹⁵⁴

Ali’s transition and skillful management of the shifting rhetoric of the reactionary 1960s to the changes of the 1970s is further evidence of Ali’s tactful understanding of societal changes. In essence, Ali reinvented himself in accordance to the turmoil of the era.

¹⁵⁴ Ali quoted in Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, 1.

Chapter VI

Vietnam: Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight

Ali's growing reputation and international appeal coincided with the highly contentious Vietnam War. He had no way of knowing how instrumental his role was to become in the domestic politics of the conflict. Rumors had begun in the mid-1960s that Ali was set to be drafted into the military. Indeed, Ali was "reclassified 1-A" in 1966 making him eligible for military service. There were some in the government who believed that Ali would be a good marketer for promoting the war effort because of his popular appeal, but Ali had no intention of joining the war cause citing his Islamic faith in being a conscientious objector. He asked, "How can I kill somebody when I pray five times a day for peace?"¹⁵⁵ More than his faith, however, he broke down the lack of justification for the war in a fundamental manner notably proclaiming, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong."¹⁵⁶ He followed that with the biting remark that vexed the United States government: "No Vietcong Ever Called Me Nigger."¹⁵⁷ Ali did not want to fight in a war that he could not morally justify, whether it was for religious purposes or social principles:

¹⁵⁵ Ali quoted in Sean Ingle, "The 20 Best Moments That Made Muhammad Ali the Greatest," *The Guardian*, June 4, 2016, accessed June 26, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2016/jun/04/muhammad-ali-death-20-best-moments>.

¹⁵⁶ Ali quoted in Roberts, "Muhammad Ali Center," 176.

¹⁵⁷ Ali quoted in Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, 194.

Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs? If I thought going to war would bring freedom and equality to twenty-two million of my people, they wouldn't have to draft me. I'd join tomorrow. But I either have to obey the laws of the land or the laws of Allah. I have nothing to lose by standing up and following my beliefs. We've been in jail for four hundred years.¹⁵⁸

Philosophically, Ali could not put himself in a place where he was part of what he believed was an unjust war whether it was fighting overseas or serving in a token role stateside. He was willing to take his stand regardless of the ramifications. In truth, the consequences were severe. Stokely Carmichael commented "Ali made his principled stand against a stupid, vicious war, [and] he [became] the most vilified and hated black man in white America."¹⁵⁹ As he drew the ire of all corners of America's white establishment, Ali inspired African Americans who were disproportionately fighting and dying in Vietnam. The well-known professor and author, Gerald Early, who has written extensively on Ali recalled, "When he refused, I felt something greater than pride: I felt as though my honor as a black boy had been defended, my honor as a human being. . . . The day that Ali refused the draft, I cried in my room. I cried for him and for myself, for my future and his, for all our black possibilities."¹⁶⁰

Before long, Ali found himself in a court battle that not only threatened his boxing career but also his freedom. Ultimately, Ali was stripped of his title and had his boxing license suspended, and on June 20, 1967, he was sentenced to five years in prison.

¹⁵⁸ Ali quoted in Roberts and Smith, *Blood Brothers*, 306.

¹⁵⁹ Stokely Carmichael and Eugene Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 226-227.

¹⁶⁰ Gerald Early quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 291.

He was freed on bail as he appealed the decision but his ban from boxing in the United States lasted for over three years; additionally, the State Department revoked his passport so that he could not fight internationally. The impact that Ali had on the internal politics of an already tensely debated war was profound. He bolstered an anti-war movement that was still in its infancy. Julian Bond expressed the surprising sentiment, “It’s hard to imagine that a sports figure could have so much political influence on so many people.”¹⁶¹ In essence, by 1967, it was clear that Ali’s sphere of influence touched affairs of all kinds.

Ali’s refusal of induction to the military was international news. Blacks in Africa, Muslims in Asia, and anti-Vietnam War sympathizers in Europe all took notice of his stand. He adamantly held his ground citing a foundation of moral principles. In so doing, Ali distributed an announcement to the press declaring:

It is in light of my own personal convictions that I take my stand in rejecting the call to be inducted into the armed services. I do so with full realization of its implications and possible consequences. I have searched my conscience, and find I cannot be true to my belief in my religion by accepting such a call If justice prevails, if my constitutional rights are upheld, I will be forced to go neither to the Army nor jail. In the end, I am confident that justice will come my way, for the truth must eventually prevail.¹⁶²

This was a pivotal moment for Ali because he was clearly no longer just a boxing champion; he was also a people’s champion, a moniker that would stick with him for the rest of his life. He was willing to give up the principal years of his boxing career and millions of dollars to lead a cause that galvanized America’s left:

I was stopped right in my prime just when I started making money. . . .
Tomorrow, I can go back to get the money if I would only deny my faith, if I

¹⁶¹ Julian Bond quote in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute*, 5.

¹⁶² Ali, *The Soul of a Butterfly*, 89.

would only join up against my religion, I could easily go back to making millions. . . . I turned it down, and I go out still with my head high. . . . I'm not what they call an "Uncle Tom." . . . The flesh and the blood and the freedom of my people come before money.¹⁶³

So significant was this time period in his boxing career that his longtime doctor Ferdie Pacheco remarked, "The world never saw what might have been. And that's very sad, like knowing a Mozart symphony or a play by Shakespeare was somehow censored out of existence."¹⁶⁴ Angelo Dundee added, "Due to his beliefs, he was robbed of the best years of his life—that's a subject that we must not forget, ever."¹⁶⁵ In effect, Ali passed on the prime of his career for a higher cause foregoing wealth and boxing fame within the ring. Ali persisted, however, and continued his fight in the face of harsh rebukes.

The most significant criticism that Ali received in his life was in relation to his refusal to adhere to the Vietnam War draft policy. The combination of Ali's popularity and volatility was polarizing at a time when the government yearned to increase support for the increasingly controversial multi-billion dollar war in Vietnam. Meanwhile, Ali impudently voiced his feelings on national broadcasts: "I will say here boldly now on television: No, I will not go ten thousand miles from here to help murder and kill another poor people simply to continue the domination of white slave masters over the darker people of the earth."¹⁶⁶ Critics in the media were incensed by Ali, labeling him as anti-American and devoid of patriotism. Producer and television personality David Susskind

¹⁶³ Ali quoted in Thirteen WNET, "A Conversation with Muhammad Ali."

¹⁶⁴ Ferdie Pacheco quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [2].

¹⁶⁵ Angelo Dundee quoted in Staufenberg, "Muhammad Ali Dead."

¹⁶⁶ Ali quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

was infuriated by Ali and directly rebuked him on a talk-show as the boxer listened: “I find nothing amusing or interesting or tolerable about this man. He’s a disgrace to his country, his race, and what he laughingly describes as his profession. He is a convicted felon in the United States. He has been found guilty. He is out on bail. He will inevitably go to prison, as well he should. He’s a simplistic fool and a pawn.”¹⁶⁷ Ali weathered the hail of insults with dignity while people aligned with the establishment became progressively weary and distanced themselves from the now former champion.

The denigration also spilled over into the government. Congressman Frank Clark of Pennsylvania was appalled by Ali’s defiance of the war: “The heavyweight champion has been a complete and total disgrace. I urge the citizens of the nation as a whole to boycott any of his performances.”¹⁶⁸ Maine Governor John Reed was in the process of helping schedule an upcoming Ali fight in his state, but instead declared, “[Ali] should be held in utter contempt by every patriotic American. Maine sons and daughters are fighting and dying in Vietnam and I don’t think Maine people want our state to be used to further the ambitions and gains of an individual of [Ali’s] character.”¹⁶⁹ World War II veteran and staunch segregationist, Congressman Joe Waggoner, of Louisiana spouted, “Cassius Clay is a phony. He knows it, the Supreme Court knows it, and everyone else knows it.”¹⁷⁰ When California Governor Ronald Reagan was approached about a boxing

¹⁶⁷ David Susskind quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

¹⁶⁸ Frank Clark quoted in Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 177.

¹⁶⁹ John Reed quoted in Rob Sneddon, *The Phantom Punch: The Story Behind Boxing's Most Controversial Bout* (Lanham, MD: Down East Books, 2016), 216.

¹⁷⁰ Joe Waggoner quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [41].

license, he retorted, “Forget it. That draft-dodger will never fight in my state.”¹⁷¹

Sportswriter Red Smith affirmed, “Cassius makes himself as sorry a spectacle as those unwashed punks who picket and demonstrate against the war,” while Jim Murray of the *Los Angeles Times* referred to Ali as “the white man’s burden.”¹⁷²

Moreover, the criticism of Ali eventually reached the highest office as Jackie Robinson stated that Ali was President Richard Nixon’s “pet peeve.”¹⁷³ Ali began to lose the support of some prominent African Americans, as well. Robinson, in fact, was critical of Ali: “I admire this man as a fighting champion and a man who speaks his mind. I can’t help feeling he wants to have his cake and eat it too. I can’t help wondering he can expect to make millions of dollars in this country and then refuse to fight for it.”¹⁷⁴ Robinson added that Ali’s stance “hurts the morale of a lot of young Negro soldiers over in Vietnam.”¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, former black boxing champion and military veteran, Joe Louis condemned Ali on his refusal to submit to the draft: “any man who doesn’t want to fight for his country, I don’t think he should have the honor to be the champion.”¹⁷⁶ Still, Ali was resilient and refused to capitulate to the government’s request to draft him amidst

¹⁷¹ Ronald Reagan quoted in Leah Wright Rigueur, “When Muhammad Ali Endorsed Ronald Reagan,” *Washington Post*, June 10, 2016, accessed August 8, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/06/10/when-muhammad-ali-endorsed-ronald-reagan/?tid=sm_tw.

¹⁷² Red Smith and Jim Murray quoted in Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 179.

¹⁷³ Jackie Robinson quoted in Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 261.

¹⁷⁴ Jackie Robinson quoted in Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 224.

¹⁷⁵ Jackie Robinson quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

¹⁷⁶ Joe Louis quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

the heavy criticism. He proudly stressed, “I have lost nothing. I have gained the respect of thousands worldwide, I have gained peace of mind.”¹⁷⁷

The commentary and attention that surrounded Ali’s conviction went beyond the government’s walls. It was felt worldwide. Ali continued to emphasize, “I can’t take part in nothing where I’d help the shooting of dark Asiatic people, who haven’t lynched me, deprived me of my freedom, justice and equality, or assassinated my leaders.”¹⁷⁸ The vitriol of Ali’s words jarred America’s establishment and invigorated the left. Ali fueled the anti-war movement and engendered fierce black pride. Two years into his suspension, in 1969, Ali further stamped his position on the war while being interviewed on Stewart Thomas’ talk-show, “Say Brother,” when he pointedly exclaimed: “I just don’t think I should go ten thousand miles from here and shoot some black people who never called me nigger, never lynched me, never put dogs on me, never raped my mama, [for people who] enslaved me and deprived me of freedom, justice, [and] equality. . . . I just can’t shoot them. . . . I just can’t go over there and shoot them people, and come back home, [where] I’m still a nigger.”¹⁷⁹ The straightforward poignancy of Ali’s language was paramount to his influence. No one with such a large audience had so plainly attacked racism in American history.

Noam Chomsky, the famed M.I.T. linguist, praised the simplicity of Ali’s paramount statement, “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong.” This simple statement resonated with people across all backgrounds because it was easily understood.

¹⁷⁷ Ali quoted in Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 225.

¹⁷⁸ Ali quoted in Gregory, “Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone.”

¹⁷⁹ Ali quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

Chomsky pronounced that it “rang serious alarm bells because it raised the question of why poor people in the United States were being forced by rich people in the United States to kill poor people in Vietnam. Putting it simply, that’s what it amounted to. And Ali put it very simply in ways that people could understand.”¹⁸⁰ Ali, again, was able to connect with a broad base through the sheer resonance of his compelling rhetoric. Furthermore, Hunter S. Thompson, the eccentric author, was enthralled with Ali’s comment that “No Vietcong ever called me Nigger.” Thompson reflected in 1978, “Muhammad Ali said that, back in 1967, and he almost went to prison for it—which says all that needs to be said right now about justice & gibberish in the White House. . . . Ali decided one day a long time ago not long after his twenty-first birthday that he was not only going to be King of the World *on his own turf*, but Crown Prince on *everybody else’s*. . . . Which is very, very *High Thinking*.”¹⁸¹ The brilliance of Ali was both in his words and actions because, in its purest form, the act of not fighting in what many around the world believed to be an unjustified war was straightforwardly appreciated. Ali’s defiance to the Vietnam War cost him dearly as a professional boxer, but his stance had a lasting significance on his personal legacy.

Moreover, Ali’s international appeal grew dramatically in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Ali had traveled to England several times in the 1960s and 1970s, gaining a supportive following amidst the growing diversity of the country as many of England’s discontented immigrants saw light in his humanitarian spirit. Mike Marqusee, the author of *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties*, spoke passionately

¹⁸⁰ Noam Chomsky quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute*, 8.

¹⁸¹ Hunter S. Thompson quoted in Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, 194.

about the impact of Ali in Britain during the 1960s: “The mid-sixties saw the birth of the term ‘Paki-bashing’ and it also saw extensive physical attacks by white races, some of them organized in fascist groups, but frankly most of them not, on Asian people who were routinely dubbed as ‘Pakis’ in those days. And in that context, for the heavyweight champion of the world to be coming to Britain and to be a Muslim, a fighting Muslim . . . was an incredible psychological boost for all the communities of color.”¹⁸² Ali was being lauded by Asian people of all backgrounds throughout the world for his defiance of the Vietnam War. His judiciousness of coming to the timely defense of the underrepresented and discriminated expanded both his energy and work for the cause of social justice.

Ali’s sensibility further propelled him into the world’s good graces. While the conservative base of America reviled him for his opposition to the war, the growing anti-war movement in the country championed Ali as a hero. The clairvoyance of eminent philosopher and friend of Ali, Lord Bertrand Russell, served to be true as he told him during the peak of the criticism not to worry too much about the consequences: “The air will change. I sense it.”¹⁸³ To that end, the renowned South American writer, Eduardo Galeano, aptly captured the impact of Ali’s refusal to be drafted and subsequent conviction in his poem, *Ali*:

He was butterfly and bee. In the ring, he floated and stung.
In 1967, Muhammad Ali, born Cassius Clay, refused to put on a uniform.
‘Got nothing against no Viet Cong,’ He said.
‘Ain’t no Vietnamese ever called me nigger.’
They called him a traitor.
They sentenced him to a five-year jail term, and barred him from boxing.

¹⁸² Mike Marqusee quoted in *Muhammad Ali: Through the Eyes of the World*, DVD.

¹⁸³ Bertrand Russell quoted in Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 223.

They stripped him of his title as champion of the world.
The punishment became his trophy.
By taking away his crown, they anointed him king.
Years later, a few college students asked him to recite something.
And for them he improvised the shortest poem in world literature:
'Me, we.'¹⁸⁴

Galeano's homage to Ali is strikingly powerful. His assessment that the government's punishment of Ali made him "king" is a sharp characterization given that Ali had been making the claim since his 1964 victory over Liston. In truth, Ali's legacy and world renown was buoyed by his personal sacrifice and courageous position on the Vietnam War. Ali ensured his devotees that he was okay and that his mindset of humanitarianism and leadership was intact: "To most of the people who think I lost so much by not taking the step, I haven't lost one thing. I have gained a lot. Number one: I have gained a peace of mind. I have gained a piece of heart. I now know I am in content with almighty God himself."¹⁸⁵ This mentality fundamentally carried Ali through his three-and-a-half year hiatus from boxing.

Effectively, Ali's popularity soared. During the period in which Ali was not allowed to fight, he became a cultural icon for the two most prevalent engagements in the United States: the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. Ali's role in the anti-war movement made him a transformational figure. He was no longer just the boxer who spoke emphatically on race and religion. The already divisive war brought Ali further into the controversies of the 1960s. Ali was vociferous about his feelings as he embarked

¹⁸⁴ Eduardo Galeano, *Ali*, "Is It Possible to Move beyond this Century of Disaster?" Oldreader.com, accessed June 16, 2016, <https://theoldreader.com/profile/1182472223f4cbb3aa62f652?page=7>.

¹⁸⁵ Ali quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

on a speaking tour that carried him from coast-to-coast. In so doing, Ali refused to succumb to the criticism he received from the traditional white establishment. Instead of tempering his approach, Ali persisted in antagonizing a power structure that had treated blacks indignantly in carrying out the war effort. Ali was unwavering: “I was determined to be one nigger that the white man didn’t get. One nigger that you didn’t get, white man. You understand? One nigger you ain’t going to get. *One nigger you ain’t going to get.*”¹⁸⁶ Historian Randy Roberts, impeccably addressed the impact that Ali’s stance on race and war had on his legacy: “Ali became the people’s champion, a folk hero for liberals and an antihero for conservatives. He became a living symbol of the oppression of black Americans and opposition to the Vietnam War. By the time the Supreme Court overturned his draft conviction he had become the most internationally recognizable and politically significant athlete in history. During the remainder of his boxing career . . . he remained a voice of the people, of citizens around the world who faced oppression, despair, and injustice.”¹⁸⁷ The hope and enthusiasm that Ali represented during the Vietnam era and beyond was unparalleled. Other great athletes of the day such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Russell, and Jim Brown followed Ali’s example in inspiring positive change on social issues, but they unequivocally looked at Ali as their principal leader. Abdul-Jabbar said, “Ali didn’t need our help because as far as the black community was concerned, he already had everybody’s heart. He gave so many people courage to test the system.”¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, Bill Russell added, “He was free. And he

¹⁸⁶ Ali quoted in Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, 89.

¹⁸⁷ Roberts, “Muhammad Ali Center,” 176.

¹⁸⁸ Kareem Abdul-Jabbar quoted in Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 225-226.

was free at a time when historically it was very difficult to be free no matter who you were or what you were. Ali was one of the first truly free people in America.”¹⁸⁹ The model of freedom that he embodied gave other African Americans hope for a better future and contributed to his significant role in the history of black advancement.

In the heart of Ali’s exile from boxing, as he was enduring the government’s persecution of his freedom, he spent much of his time thinking, studying, and speaking. He pointedly furthered the cause for human rights and in the process amplified his notoriety. He reflected in a 1975 *Playboy* interview, “I had a good time speaking at colleges and meeting the students—whites, blacks, and all kinds, but mainly whites, who supported me a hundred percent. They were as much against the Vietnam War as I was.”¹⁹⁰ The personal anecdotes from his three-and-a-half years away from boxing are some of the most compelling pieces to the narrative of his life. *The Black Scholar*, for instance, interviewed Ali in June 1970 to update his feelings on his exile from boxing and apprise readers of his emotional state as he was going through his legal proceedings. Ali summarized his feelings by telling a story of having met two black soldiers in an airport who expressed grief for his persecution by the government. Ali told them that his battle was not near the fight that they were soon going to undertake: “Brothers, you just don’t know. If you knew where you were going now, if you knew your chances of coming out with no arm or no eye, fighting those people in their own land, fighting Asian brothers, you got to shoot them, they never lynched you, never called you nigger, never put dogs on you, never shot your leaders. . . . and as soon as you get home you won’t be able to

¹⁸⁹ Bill Russell quoted in Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 226.

¹⁹⁰ Ali quoted in Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, 151.

find a job. Going to jail for a few years is nothing compared to that.”¹⁹¹ Ali was focused on fighting for their freedoms as well as his own. There was a higher purpose to his challenge of the draft board and his opposition to the war. Ali sacrificed three-and-a-half years of his career during the litigation of his court proceedings, but his hope was to lead an anti-war cause that would save lives and prevent further devastation in Southeast Asia.

As the Vietnam War came to a close in the mid-1970s, Ali wanted to make it clear that he was not anti-American. Ali was adamant that his refusal to be drafted and opposition to the war in Vietnam was on moral grounds. He commented in 1975 that he would have been fine with fighting in a war that had a strong purpose, but not for a war that he felt was indignant: “If America was attacked and some foreign force was prowling the streets and shooting, naturally I’d fight. I’m on the side of America, not them, because I’m fighting for myself, my children, and my people. Whatever foreigners would come in, if they saw some black people with rifles, I’m sure they’d start shooting. So, yeah, I’d fight if America was attacked.”¹⁹² Ali’s patriotism was never fully appreciated by the conservative establishment, however. His biggest critics never forgave him for choosing not to serve in the military. In recent years, some have derided the honorary celebrations of Ali’s life because of his relationship to the Vietnam War. For instance, when Ali was asked to throw the first pitch of the 2004 Major League Baseball All-Star game, one of his fellow honorees, hall of fame baseball player, Bob Feller, was infuriated about Ali’s presence. The World War II veteran exclaimed, “I object very strongly to Muhammad Ali being here and you can print that. This is a man

¹⁹¹ Ali quoted in Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, 83.

¹⁹² Ali quoted in Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, 152.

who changed his name and changed his religion so he wouldn't have to serve his country, and, to me, that's disgusting."¹⁹³ Feller plainly had the viewpoint that one is to serve their country regardless of personal circumstances. Moreover, he misinterpreted why Ali changed his name and religion. The larger point, however, is that some Americans never forgave Ali for taking a stand against the Vietnam War.

Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts commented years after the war, "I think Muhammad's actions contributed enormously to the debate about whether the United States should be in Vietnam and galvanized some of his admirers to join the protests against the war for the first time."¹⁹⁴ Ali's position on the war influenced countless people and propelled his stature in both black and white circles. Even Ronald Reagan, the hero of the right, who had vilified Ali as unpatriotic in 1970 came around to embracing Ali during his presidency.¹⁹⁵ Ali reminisced in 2001, "My refusal to go to Vietnam did not just help the black people, it helped more white people. . . . and all the people who hate injustice backed me for that."¹⁹⁶ In short, the acclaim that Ali gained while also being ridiculed by the ingrained American structures served to elevate him to a higher status upon his return to the ring.

¹⁹³ Bob Feller quoted in Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 303.

¹⁹⁴ Ted Kennedy quoted in Gregory, "Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone."

¹⁹⁵ Rigueur, "When Muhammad Ali Endorsed Ronald Reagan."

¹⁹⁶ Ali quoted in Gregory, "Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone," *Time*.

Chapter VII

Ali's Comeback and Becoming the "King"

The long awaited return to boxing for Ali came on October 26, 1970, against Jerry Quarry. Quarry was an enthused twenty-five year old who became one of boxing's most popular fighters during Ali's exile. The site of the fight was set in Atlanta but people tuned in from all over the world to follow Ali's comeback. The Reverend Jesse Jackson spoke to George Plimpton on the day of the fight and opined:

Symbolically, [if Ali loses], it would suggest that the forces of blind patriotism are right, that dissent is wrong, that protest means you don't love the country They tried to railroad him. They refused to believe his testimony about his convictions and his religion. They wouldn't let him practice his profession. They tried to break his spirit and his body. Martin Luther King has a song: 'Truth crushed to the earth will rise again.' That's the black ethos. With [Ali] all we had was the hope, the psychological longing for his return. And it happened! In Georgia, of all places, and against a white man. . . . So there are tremendous social implications. [Ali's] a hero.¹⁹⁷

Undeniably, the site of the fight in Atlanta where segregationist views were paramount added to the drama of the event. Lester Maddox, Governor of Georgia, tried to stop the fight calling it a "tragic thing" that Georgia would be the place where he made his return: "I don't see how this fight could take place really anywhere in the United States of America by a man that has denounced his country's uniform [and] refused to be inducted."¹⁹⁸ Eminent boxing commentator, Bert Sugar, aptly characterized the moment by noting the symbolism of the milieu: "Muhammad Ali against Jerry Quarry in Atlanta

¹⁹⁷ Jesse Jackson quoted in Gregory, "Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone."

¹⁹⁸ Lester Maddox quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

marked the greatest collection of black money and black power ever assembled up until that time. Right in the heart of the Old Confederacy, it was *Gone With The Wind* turned upside down.”¹⁹⁹ People from all corners of the civil rights movement were in attendance. It was an eruption of African-American support for Ali. All were riveted by Ali’s return and saw him quickly dismantle Quarry in the third round. Coretta Scott King admirably told Ali after the fight, “I want to say that you are not only our champion in the boxing area, but you’re also our champion of justice and peace and human dignity.”²⁰⁰ The Quarry fight marked the beginning of an impatient return to the boxing spotlight for Ali because he was unsure of what his future held. Simply put, he did not know if he would have his boxing privileges revoked again in the near future.

Ali fought again two months later in December against Oscar Bonavena of Argentina, a punishing fifteen-round victory, to stay undefeated in his professional career. His doctor, Ferdie Pacheco, felt that Ali had taken an excessive pounding in beating Bonavena and that he was not necessarily ready to fight Joe Frazier, the champion, after his three-and-a-half year layoff. Pacheco commented contritely, “But the money was there; the opportunity was there. And Ali didn’t know if he’d be fighting or in jail in four or five months, so he went after it.”²⁰¹ Indeed, Ali began his verbal assault on Frazier and within three months they squared off in the ring.

The fight against Frazier on March 8, 1971 at Madison Square Garden in New York City was a spectacle. It had taken over the claim as “Fight of the Century,” as the

¹⁹⁹ Bert Sugar quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [50].

²⁰⁰ Coretta Scott King quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

²⁰¹ Ferdie Pacheco quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 216.

match is widely recognized by boxing aficionados as one of the greatest fight in history. Ali quipped, “On that night, they’ll be waiting everywhere; England, France, Italy. Egypt and Israel will declare a forty-five-minute truce. Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran; even Red China and Formosa. Not since time began has there been a night like this.”²⁰² Ali entered the contest a different fighter from the one who had defeated Liston seven years prior. He was also a different man. He was now a cultural icon who brought with him a windfall of supporters from around the world; conversely, he characterized Frazier to be dumb and wholly unworthy of having devotees. Largely due to pro-Vietnam forces, much of the rhetoric leading up to the fight portrayed Frazier as being aligned with white conservatives, while Ali was clearly characterized as the face of black America. In fact, one popular Ali-Frazier fight program said, “It will be Ali the draft-dodger versus patriotic Joe; Ali the loudmouth versus soft spoken Joe; Ali the Muslim against Bible-reading Baptist Joe.”²⁰³ In essence, Frazier’s upbringing and life challenges were the epitome of the black experience in America; however, traditionalists were so eager for Ali to be defeated that they gravitated to Frazier and he was ironically placed in the role of the “Great White Hope.”

Frazier grew up amidst poverty in Beaufort, South Carolina, as one of thirteen children. He did not make it beyond ninth grade and was not politically inclined.²⁰⁴ In short, Frazier’s deprived upbringing exemplified the challenges for black southerners after years of slavery. Somehow, though, he became known as an “Uncle Tom” because

²⁰² Ali quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [59].

²⁰³ Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [58].

²⁰⁴ Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 216.

of Ali's verbal barrage. Bryant Gumbel, the intellectual commentator summed it up: "Joe Frazier was an available symbol behind whom people who hated Ali could unite. Was it Joe's fault? Of course not. In fact, one of the sad stories to be written about that era is that Joe Frazier never got his due as a man. In some ways, he symbolized what the black man's struggle was about far more than Ali did. But it was Joe's misfortune to be cast as the opponent of a man who was the champion of all good things."²⁰⁵ In truth, Ali did not treat Frazier properly—he demeaned him and did so beyond repair. It was wrong and with hindsight he came to regret the personal attacks. Dave Wolf, Frazier's manager, referred to Ali's treatment of Frazier as "cruel; that's all" recalling, "Joe, as a result of his background and upbringing, was almost the stereotypic black person Ali claimed to be fighting for . . . And after a while, it went so far beyond what was necessary . . . There were moments when Joe was so hurt and which he remembers so vividly . . . A lot of it was calculated to give Ali a psychological edge in the fight, but Ali took it beyond that. There was a bullying sadistic quality to what he did, like pulling the wings off a dying insect."²⁰⁶ This depiction of Ali is certainly not among his finest moments and critics of his have referenced this as an example of using his verbal prowess in a terrible manner. Ultimately, Ali's characterization of Frazier created an emotionally hurtful relationship between the two fighters, something for which Ali expressed remorse later in life.

In an extraordinary fifteen-round clash, Frazier unanimously defeated Ali, prompting Ali supporters to rally behind him in the days and weeks ahead. Ali later recognized that Frazier was too tough of an opponent to have fought so recently after his

²⁰⁵ Bryant Gumbel quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [68].

²⁰⁶ Dave Wolf quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 219-220.

boxing exile.²⁰⁷ Despite being hurt badly late in the fight Ali finished the match. The *Hong Kong Standard* recounted, “Ali was still vertical at the end because he was just too proud a man, too magnificent an athlete and too gutsy a warrior to let himself stay down.”²⁰⁸ It was the first loss of his professional career. Remarkably, even in defeat, Ali was immortalized.

A shock and depression pervaded the world of boxing, but the true meaning of Ali was amplified in the defeat. He was not just a boxer. Bryant Gumbel remembered, “I cried my eye balls out, cried my eye balls out. Not just because he lost. But because he symbolized so much. It wasn’t about sports. It was about wars, it was about race, it was about politics, it was about society, it was about generations. And the feeling was that if Ali lost, then, then we were wrong.”²⁰⁹ Gumbel and many other African Americans were distraught as he added, “I was devastated. It was awful . . . it was a terrible, terrible night. I’ll never forget it as long as I live. The feeling was like when Richard Nixon won that crushing reelection mandate a year later. That was devastating, but Ali losing was much more personal.”²¹⁰ People all over the world felt the depression of the loss, while Ali tried to soften the affect: “Just lost a fight, that’s all. There are more important things

²⁰⁷ Ali, *The Soul of a Butterfly*, 111.

²⁰⁸ *Hong Kong Standard* quoted in Walter and Iida, “Muhammad Ali: Exemplar to the World.”

²⁰⁹ Bryant Gumbel quoted in Ibhof2, “Muhammad Ali – Sports Century (Documentary),” YouTube, October 22, 2011, accessed August 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9-gsfbQFPk>.

²¹⁰ Gumbel quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 224-225.

to worry about in life.”²¹¹ Ambalavaner Sivanandan, the Sri Lankan writer, who devoted his life to the betterment of race relations expressed his grief by citing Ali’s larger humanitarian role:

Tonight the black world weeps that their king has passed away. But tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow . . . every black man will become his own king—for that is the legacy that Muhammad Ali leaves. . . . The civil rights movement had only served to cordon off the black athlete in a Bantustan of sport. It was left to Malcolm X and the Black Power movement to threaten the total release of the negro. Muhammad Ali is the epitome of that release. And it is this that bugs white society. He is not just a prizefighter, he is not even one man. He is many men—and all of them black.²¹²

Sivanandan words craft the feelings of so many black people in the world at that point in 1971, both in America and in Africa. Ali was known everywhere—it has been suggested that he was the most photographed human in the world—and his standing in regard to the cause for freedom and justice for the underrepresented was unprecedented.

On June 28, 1971—four years after his conviction and not long after the Frazier fight—the Supreme Court reversed Ali’s sentence on a technicality dismissing all charges.²¹³ He was now free to begin his quest to regain his championship. He fought fourteen bouts over the next three years, including a victory over Frazier in January 1974. In the process, he traveled globally and continued moving his cultural status in the direction of a world spokesman, gearing himself for a monumental international event in which he found himself comfortably at home in Kinshasa, Zaire—the chosen location for Ali’s attempt to reclaim the championship against George Foreman.

²¹¹ Ali quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 233.

²¹² Ambalavaner Sivanandan quoted in Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 261.

²¹³ Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 238.

The Foreman fight, known as the “Rumble in the Jungle,” took place on October 30, 1974. Leading up to the event, there was a broad feeling of Pan-Africanism of which Ali took full advantage. Ali, once again, had managed to get an enormous majority of blacks, both in America and Africa, to support him in his fight against Foreman. Norman Mailer shadowed Ali during his time in Zaire and chronicled the events in his detailed account, *The Fight*, reflecting an enormous cultural advantage for Ali.²¹⁴ Mailer held that Ali was “God” to the people of Zaire.²¹⁵ Foreman, like Frazier, was almost portrayed as the white enemy in the fight or, at least, as a black man fighting on behalf of whites to suppress Ali’s voice and status. Looking back on the intensity and excitement of the fight, Stokely Carmichael was enraptured by what this moment meant for blacks throughout the world: “Young people today have no real idea what Muhammad Ali meant to our generation of black people in the world. He was to us our warrior saint. . . . We’ve produced great athletes before who were just that. What was different with Muhammad Ali was his unconquerable moral courage and principle. His obvious undying love of our people. The many, many sacrifices he willingly made for principle.”²¹⁶ To that end, the following that Ali had in Zaire was incredible. In sum, everywhere Ali went, he was mobbed by supporters, young and old, men and women.

The politics between fight promoters and the corrupt dictator King Mobutu Sese Seko, who ran an egregious “kleptocracy” in Zaire are a study in themselves. It was

²¹⁴ Norman Mailer, *The Fight* (New York: Vintage International, 1997, originally published in 1975).

²¹⁵ Mailer quoted in *When We Were Kings*, dir. Leon Gast (USA Films: 1999), DVD.

²¹⁶ Carmichael quoted in Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 706.

believed that Mobutu was the seventh wealthiest man in the world while the average annual income of a Zairean citizen was roughly seventy dollars a year.²¹⁷ Despite the disturbing revelations of Zaire's "kleptocracy," the work that Ali did with the African platform truly stands out in history. Leon Gast's riveting documentary, *When We Were Kings*, aptly covers the impact that Ali had on the African community. Masses of Africans huddled around Ali when he trained screaming in unison, "Ali Bomaye, Ali, Bomaye!" meaning, "Ali, kill him!"²¹⁸ Ferdie Pacheco recollected, "Watching Ali in Zaire was wonderful. He'd go on walks into areas where I don't think they had electricity, let alone television sets, and everyone knew him. To see the looks on people's faces when they saw him, the love, the power he had over them; it was spine-tingling."²¹⁹ The film of the moments when Ali was amongst the crowds is certainly stirring. On the other hand, Foreman did not have a large following in Zaire.

Ali's favorability amongst Africans was overwhelming. He had Foreman dumbfounded by the emotional reaction of the Africans. Foreman knew he looked a lot more like a native African than Ali and was deeply perturbed by the manufactured alienation he experienced due to Ali's magnetism. One native of Zaire reflected on the experience of having both fighters in his home country: "We were all for Muhammad Ali. Foreman, we didn't know him. Foreman said, 'Why? I'm black, blacker than Muhammad Ali. Why hold this bias?' Yes, Muhammad Ali, he was lighter, but he was a

²¹⁷ Mailer, *The Fight*, 22-23.

²¹⁸ *When We Were Kings*, DVD.

²¹⁹ Ferdie Pacheco quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 265-266.

real person; he was genuine. Muhammad Ali could have been even lighter skinned than he was but for us he was defending the good cause; for Africans and the whole world.”²²⁰ Mailer observed the irony in his account: “. . . Foreman seemed more black. Ali was not without white blood, not without a lot of it. Something in his personality was cheerfully even exuberantly white in the way of a six-foot two-inch president of a Southern college fraternity. At times Ali was like nothing so much as a white actor who had put on too little makeup for the part and so was not wholly convincing as a Black, just one of eight hundred small contradictions in Ali . . . Foreman could be mistaken for African long before Ali.”²²¹ Still, the rallying cry in Kinshasa remained “Ali, Bomaye,” and Ali controlled the masses with a smoothness reserved only for the most gifted of public figures.

Ali was excited for the bout to be held in Zaire. While reporter Jim Murray of the *Los Angeles Times* complained, “They’re holding the world heavyweight championship fight in the Congo. I guess the top of Mount Everest was busy,” Ali bragged about the opportunity to fight in Africa.²²² He told the press, “It’s a great feeling being in a country operated by black people. I wish all black people in America could see this . . . everything here is black. The soldiers, the president, the faces on the money. It don’t seem possible, but twenty-eight million people run this country, and not one white man is involved.”²²³ One government sign on the highway in Zaire read, “A fight between two

²²⁰ Zairean citizen quoted in *When We Were Kings*, DVD.

²²¹ Mailer, *The Fight*, 47.

²²² Jim Murray quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 265.

²²³ Ali quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 265.

Blacks in a Black nation, organized by Blacks and seen by the whole world.”²²⁴ The enthusiasm that Ali brought to the fight came once again in the form of poetry as he emphatically stated, “You think the world was shocked when Nixon resigned?/Wait till I whup George Foreman’s behind.”²²⁵ Still, there were many who feared for Ali’s safety as he was looked upon as an older and slower boxer at this point in his career. One account just before the fight had Foreman favored at three-to-one odds.²²⁶ Announcer Howard Cosell sadly stated, “The time may have come to say goodbye to Muhammad Ali because, very honestly, I don’t think he can beat George Foreman.”²²⁷ Cosell elaborated that Ali was not the fighter he had been ten years prior to which Ali quickly responded with his standard playful eloquence that Cosell’s wife told him that he was not the man he was just two years ago.²²⁸ Ali was as boisterous as ever and invoked his first major professional victory over Sonny Liston as the parallel to what he was going to see in Foreman: “This man is supposed to annihilate me, but ten years ago they said the same thing about Sonny Liston. George Foreman don’t stand a chance . . . I’ll be king again. I’m fighting another Sonny Liston.”²²⁹

²²⁴ Mailer, *The Fight*, 20.

²²⁵ Ali quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 269.

²²⁶ Dave Anderson, “Foreman 3-1 over Ali in Zaire Tonight: Foreman 3-1 to Beat Ali in Africa Tonight.” *New York Times*, October 29, 1974, 45.

²²⁷ Howard Cosell quoted in *When We Were Kings*, DVD.

²²⁸ *When We Were Kings*, DVD.

²²⁹ Ali quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 271.

Ali's bravado masked a tacit fear that many believe he felt inside. Foreman had easily defeated Frazier and Ken Norton, both of whom had defeated Ali. Simply put, Foreman was the most feared heavyweight boxer in the world. The common refrain amongst boxing correspondents was that Ali was not the same fighter he had been before his exile from the sport. Mailer suggested that Ali was no longer the athlete of his twenties: "In the three years after his title was taken for refusing to go into the army . . . he had every kind of life but a fighter's; he lectured, was onstage in New York as an actor, traveled, lay fallow. He had fun."²³⁰ Reminiscent of the fears prognosticators had for Ali ten years earlier in his fight against Liston—albeit for different reasons—people felt like Ali was in danger. Henry Clark, a talented heavyweight in his own right, was a sparring partner of Foreman's and a friend of Ali. He remarked, "George does not hit like other fighters. Even a punch on the arms leaves you feeling paralyzed, and that's with heavy gloves. Ali is a friend of mine, and I'm afraid he's going to get hurt. George is the most punishing human being I've ever been in with."²³¹ In typical Ali fashion, however, he rebuked his critics and guaranteed a victory in his customary poetic form.

Ali saw the fight against Foreman in Zaire as an opportunity to further change the world and push forward the cause for social justice. The grandeur of winning boxing matches was secondary to Ali: "They don't know that I'm using boxing for the sake of getting over certain points you couldn't get over without it. Being a fighter allows me to attain certain ends. I'm not doing this for the glory of fighting, but to change a lot of

²³⁰ Mailer, *The Fight*, 25.

²³¹ Henry Clark quoted in Mailer, *The Fight*, 52

things.”²³² Again, boxing was the platform to spread his humanitarian impact. In an interview with famed British broadcaster David Frost shortly before the match, Ali’s true vision about the impact of the fight was conveyed in magnificent fashion:

I’m representing the freedom of black people in America. I want to be the one black man who stands up and look[s] at white people and tell[s] the truth, who don’t sell ‘em out, who don’t Uncle Tom. . . . [who] take[s] his fame to uplift his little brother in the ghetto. . . . [Other famous blacks] are white minded . . . they don’t think black . . . they get their fame and they leave their little people . . . I wanna win so I can come home and speak for the brother who’s living in [a] rat-infested house, sleeping on concrete in the ghetto . . . so, God, I’m your tool, I’m your servant, let me get this man tonight! . . . This is the way I feel. So, I’m not fighting for me. . . . I’m fighting slavery.²³³

Frost was mesmerized. The emotion that Frost and observers felt in the interview setting was palpable. He simply responded with admiration: “What you do for black pride is absolutely incredible.”²³⁴ It was a special moment that defined Ali’s existence. And a moment that Frost never forgot as he referred to Ali as his hero later in life.

Ali had a canny understanding of his role in the world. After all, he had traveled widely over the last ten years and he knew what he meant to not only blacks in America but to the people of the world. He was eager to take this fight and use a victory to promote the causes in which he believed: “If I win, I’m going to be the Black Kissinger. It’s full of glory, but it’s tiresome. Every time I visit a place, I got to go by the schools,

²³² Ali quoted in Mailer, *The Fight*, 79.

²³³ Ali quoted in Steve Lamb, “David Frost Interview with Muhammad Ali in 1974,” YouTube, March 3, 2012, accessed August 9, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FLjFI8VVag.

²³⁴ David Frost quoted in Steve Lamb, “David Frost Interview with Muhammad Ali in 1974.”

by the old folks' home. I'm not just a fighter, I'm a world figure to these people."²³⁵

Mailer, like many of the press in Zaire, was in awe of Ali, but he was flabbergasted by the audacious nature of Ali: "Here was this tall pale Negro from Louisville, born to be some modern species of flunky to some bourbon-minted redolent white voice, and instead was living with a vision of himself as a world leader, president not of America, or even a United Africa, but leader of half the western world, leader doubtless of future Black and Arab republics."²³⁶ Ali's rhetoric and bombast captivated the scene in Zaire and it was purely scintillating for those who followed him. Just as he did ten years earlier against Liston, he warned the press not to bet against him, levying a bold prediction as the fight approached: "This fight is going to be not only the largest boxing [event], but it will prove to be the largest [event] in the history of the world. It will be the greatest upset of which anyone has ever heard, and to those who are ignorant of boxing, it will seem like the greatest miracle."²³⁷

The fight began at four o'clock in the morning so that it could be viewed at a more optimal time in the United States. The time of the fight did not stop it from being a penetrating setting in Kinshasa. Mailer was with the Ali contingent in the hours before he entered the ring and found the atmosphere to be surreal: "Before the fight, I saw a scene that was incomparable. Ali's dressing room was like a morgue. It was like the Last Supper. . . . They all believed that he was going to be defeated. And they were terrified. They thought that, with his pride, he would take one of the world's worst

²³⁵ Ali quoted in Mailer, *The Fight*, 78.

²³⁶ Mailer, *The Fight*, 79.

²³⁷ Ali quoted in Mailer, *The Fight*, 65.

beatings ever. That he wouldn't give up. And he was going to be destroyed in that ring—killed or maimed.”²³⁸ Ali's team was legitimately scared for their fighter because Foreman was such an intimidating force. According to Mailer, Ali felt obliged to lift the spirits and simply said, “Why is everyone so unhappy?” And then he started yelling, “I'm gonna dance!” Consequently, the whole team started screaming that they were going to dance. It was another example of Ali's powerful rhetorical influence. Mailer was in wonderment by the interaction and concluded that Ali “built them up to a degree, so that, for him they became half-happy.”²³⁹ Moments later the fight began with resounding screams from the crowd echoing, “Ali, Bomaye!”

Ali came out unconventionally as he threw more right hands in the first round than typical and then reverted to his famous “rope-a-dope” tactic where he let Foreman unleash a barrage of punches on him for the next six rounds in hopes of tiring him out. Ferdie Pacheco summed it up beautifully: “What Ali did in the ring that night was truly inspired . . . The man had the greatest chin in the history of the heavyweight division. He had as much courage as anyone who ever fought. He could think creatively and clearly with bombs flying around him. And he showed it all when it mattered most that night with the most amazing performance I've ever seen.”²⁴⁰ Ultimately, the “rope-a-dope” tactic was successful and Ali staged another of the great upsets in boxing history. The people of Zaire were beyond jubilant. David Frost, who was ringside screamed, “Muhammad Ali has done it. The great man has done it. This is the most joyous scene

²³⁸ Mailer quoted in *When We Were Kings*, DVD.

²³⁹ Mailer quoted in *When We Were Kings*, DVD.

²⁴⁰ Ferdie Pacheco quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 274.

ever seen in the history of boxing. This is an incredible scene. The place is going wild. Muhammad Ali has won.”²⁴¹ Indeed, Ali had shocked boxing experts the world over. It had been seven years since he was stripped of his title and he was once again champion of the world. His supporters in Zaire and around the world were ecstatic.

The victory over Foreman was a redemption for Ali. He regained what many around the world strongly believed was unethically taken away from him. Ali’s achievement raised his world stature to a higher level and even his critics could not help but recognize the goodwill that was spread by Ali’s triumph. The day after the fight Maury Allen of the *New York Post* wrote:

There are certain heroes of sports who transcend the games and contests they participate in. They become folk heroes, figures of such enormity they cross the standard barriers. . . . Muhammad Ali does it best of all. It is time to recognize Ali for what he is; the greatest athlete of his time and maybe all time and one of the most important and brave men of all American time. The time has come to end the bitterness and forget the past. It seems time to appreciate and enjoy this incredible athlete, this wondrous man.²⁴²

Ali had reached uncharted territory in his career by recapturing the title against Foreman. Less than two months after the fight, President Gerald Ford invited him to the White House to offer congratulations. Conservatives who never forgave Ali for his refusal to submit to the draft were incensed, but President Ford insisted on moving forward later recalling,

when I took office, we as a nation were pretty much torn apart. There were conflicts between families, in colleges, and on the streets. We’d gone through some serious race problems; the Vietnam War had heightened differences; and of course there was the heritage of Watergate. And one of the major challenges my administration faced was how we could heal the country. . . . I think that, during

²⁴¹ David Frost quoted in Mailer, *The Fight*, 210.

²⁴² Maury Allen, *New York Post*, October 31, 1974, quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 280.

the two-and-a-half years I was president, we did that, and having Muhammad Ali come to the Oval Office was part of our overall effort. . . . he was a man of principle. I know there were some who thought he evaded his military responsibility, but I've never questioned anybody's dedication to whatever religion they believe in I accepted his decision. And because of his principles, I firmly believe that as time goes on, Muhammad Ali will be remembered for more than just excellence in athletics. I suppose it's premature to say how history will be written, but I'm quite sure that his page will talk about him as more than just a superb athlete.²⁴³

These words from a conservative Republican president are emblematic of the profound effect that Ali had on people of all backgrounds. He was clearly a favorite of the left, but his greatness is more pronounced in the moments where his critics were able to find the benevolence and solidarity that was proliferated by Ali.

As Ali continued his prowess as world champion again, there was one more great fight in his career that was to take place before his real decline in the ring and in his health. The third match with Frazier represented a "rubber match" and was to take place in the Philippines. Ali dubbed the fight "The Thrilla in Manilla," proclaiming, "It will be a killer/and a chiller/and a thrilla/When I get the gorilla/In Manila."²⁴⁴ The contest took place on October 1, 1975 in scorching heat and humidity with an estimated seven hundred million viewers across the world. Ali continued his verbal harassment of Frazier, which intensified the bitterness bringing the personal feud between the two fighters to its peak. Frazier said before the fight, "I want to hurt him. I don't want to knock him out. I want to take his heart out."²⁴⁵ In effect, the fight was a brutal foray for both men.

²⁴³ Gerald Ford quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 281-282.

²⁴⁴ Ali quoted in in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 313.

²⁴⁵ Joe Frazier quoted in in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 314.

The bout proved to have lasting effects on both fighters. Associated Press writer, Ed Schuyler, commented, “it was hell the whole way. I’ve never seen two people give more, ever.”²⁴⁶ Ali and Frazier bludgeoned one another in the Philippines. Ferdie Pacheco recalled, “The closest to life and death I’ve ever seen. Two equally matched fighters at the top of their form with intense competitive edge on each other; if not dislike, actual hatred, if you will. It didn’t seem that you could survive that.”²⁴⁷ Angelo Dundee added, “It looked like Ali was gonna have to quit in the corner because he was getting so beat up. He said ‘I feel like I’m dying. This must be what death feels like.’”²⁴⁸ Both men were exhausted from the debilitating weather conditions and punishment; after the fourteenth round it looked like neither fighter could make it out for the final round. Inevitably, Frazier’s corner man, Eddie Futch, ended the contest because of the severe damage done to his fighter. As Frazier protested, Futch purportedly told him, “No one will ever forget what you did here today.”²⁴⁹ Ali, in excruciating pain, reflected afterwards, “My God, what that man did to me.”²⁵⁰ Pacheco pointedly summarized the devastating effects on Ali: “Ali was badly beaten up. . . . he said that fight was the closest

²⁴⁶ Ed Schuyler quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 321.

²⁴⁷ Ferdie Pacheco quoted in Ibhof2, “Muhammad Ali – Sports Century.”

²⁴⁸ Angelo Dundee quoted in Ibhof2, “Muhammad Ali – Sports Century.”

²⁴⁹ Eddie Futch quoted in Gregory, “Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone.”

²⁵⁰ Ali quoted in Gregory, “Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone.”

thing to death he knew of.”²⁵¹ Indeed, Ali was quoted the next day on the front page of the *Washington Post* as saying, “What you saw tonight was next to death.”²⁵²

Many believe that the beatings that Ali took in the fights against Frazier and Foreman along with his bouts in the late 1970s and into the 1980s contributed to his precipitous decline in health. He was never the same after the Frazier fight in Manila. As his health deteriorated, he continued his efforts to be a person who spoke to the world. He traveled extensively and reached out to those in need. His boxing career ended on a sad note in fights that should have never taken place against Larry Holmes and Trevor Berbick in 1980 and 1981, both losses. It was obvious that Ali was not fit for the Holmes fight. Doctors discouraged the bout for Ali. During the match, Holmes was pleading with the referee to end the match while Howard Cosell agonizingly called out for someone to stop the fight because of the pounding that Ali was enduring. Barack Obama’s statement at Ali’s funeral in 2016 aptly summarized the mix of emotions that the Holmes fight represented for black Americans:

It was 1980, and an epic career was in its twilight. Everybody knew it, probably including The Champ himself. Ali went into one of his final fights an underdog; all the smart money was on the new champ, Larry Holmes. And in the end, the odds makers were right.

A few hours later, at 4 a.m., after the loss, after all the fans had gone, a sportswriter asked a restroom attendant if he’d bet on the fight. The man—black, getting on in years—said he’d put his money on Ali. The writer asked why. ‘Why?’ he said. ‘Why? Because he’s Muhammad Ali, that’s why. Mister, I’m 72 years old. I owe the man for giving me my dignity.’²⁵³

²⁵¹ Ferdie Pacheco quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 324.

²⁵² Ali quoted in William Barry Furlong, “Ali Taps Well of Strength to Stage a Chilling Rally,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 1975, E1.

²⁵³ Obama quoted in Garunay, “President Obama’s Tribute to Muhammad Ali.”

Ali was a mere shell of the fighter he once was, but he could not help himself from attempting to put on a show for his millions of admirers and use the boxing platform to spread goodwill. He knew as early as 1977 that he should have retired when he spoke to an audience in Newcastle, England:

I want to retire after [my next fight] but . . . I talked to about twenty African presidents and a couple of those who are fighting for independence . . . and I'm so surprised to find out that every one of those presidents, they knew me, they knew my history, and they all want me to come to their country, and all their people want me to come to their country. And I found out through boxing, I can do so much to help so many people. And our people in the states. And for me to give up and to get out of the public . . . at this time when the world is struggling and there's so much I can do would be terrible. And through boxing . . . there's so much I can do . . . I want to do something to help humanity.²⁵⁴

Ali simply could not force himself to leave the spotlight of the arena. After the Berbick fight, in 1981, he began to publicly slow down but continued in his pursuit of social justice. By 1984, Ali was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. In the years ahead, the disease weakened one of his greatest physical assets—his ability to talk. Yet, Ali still found ways to spend the last thirty-plus years of his life after boxing positively impacting the world and everyone he touched.

²⁵⁴ Ali quoted in Glovesymbc Gloves, "An Audience with Muhammad Ali Newcastle 1977," YouTube, August 18, 2014, accessed August 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1xVXLCXfic>.

Chapter VIII

Summary and Conclusions: Life after Boxing

Ali's post-boxing life was slowed down by his affliction with Parkinson's disease, but he did not allow the sickness to hinder his impact on the world. In retirement, Ali reached singular status as a world hero. His own acknowledgement of his role after boxing epitomizes his legacy as Ali wrote: "It was after I retired from boxing that my true work began. I had more time then to develop my spiritual being."²⁵⁵ Thomas Hauser put it succinctly, "Muhammad Ali is an international treasure."²⁵⁶ Ali, through his sheer desire for peace, became a symbol for goodwill across the world. Maya Angelou added, "Muhammad Ali was not just Muhammad Ali the greatest, the African-American pugilist; he belonged to everyone. That means that his impact recognizes no continent, no language, no color, no ocean."²⁵⁷ Ali was able to ingratiate himself with people of all backgrounds, especially his black brethren, after having been one of the most hated people in America. Like Mandela, Ali did not seek revenge against those who persecuted him: "Throughout my life, I never sought retribution against those who hurt me because I believe in forgiveness. I have practiced forgiving, just as I want to be forgiven."²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵ Ali, *The Soul of a Butterfly*, xv.

²⁵⁶ Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute*, 12.

²⁵⁷ Maya Angelou quoted in Gregory, "Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone."

²⁵⁸ Ali, *The Soul of a Butterfly*, xvii.

Indeed, Mandela himself, saw Ali as a heroic figure. Upon Mandela's release from prison in 1990, when he was given the opportunity to meet Ali, he stated, "Muhammad Ali was not just my hero, but the hero of millions of young, black South Africans . . . He was an inspiration to me, even in prison, because I thought of his courage and commitment."²⁵⁹ In the last decades of Ali's life, when his oratorical gifts were diminished, he mended relationships and made great effort to develop positive interactions between people across the world.

Ali learned at a young age what the sport of boxing could do for him to change the world. He took great pride in his accomplishments and enjoyed challenging white society from the platform that was granted to him from boxing. Ali did, however, remain conflicted on how he made his living because of the simple idea that black men were providing entertainment by pounding each other in a ring. In 1970, Ali expressed his feelings of conflict by suggesting that he was still not respected by white society:

[White people] stand around and say, 'Good fight, boy; you're a good boy; good goin.' They don't look at fighters to have brains. They don't look at fighters to be businessmen, or human, or intelligent. Fighters are just brutes that come to entertain the rich white people. Beat up on each other and break each other's noses, and bleed, and show off like two little monkeys for the crowd, killing each other for the crowd. And half the crowd is white. We're just like two slaves in that ring. The masters get two of us big old black slaves and let us fight it out while they bet: 'My slave can whup your slave.' That's what I see when I see two black people fighting.²⁶⁰

In some respects, the life that Ali lived can be linked to the mirroring of slavery and boxing. Ali never lost sight of how boxing was rooted in the violent past of slavery, but he had the understanding of how he could use the sport to expose the plight of African

²⁵⁹ Nelson Mandela quoted in Staufenberg, "Muhammad Ali Dead."

²⁶⁰ Muhammad Ali quoted in Remnick, *King of the World*, 221.

Americans during the era of Jim Crow. For Ali, it was about much more than being an athlete. His contemporary, the tennis star Arthur Ashe, saw Ali as pioneer: “Ali went beyond [being a great athlete]. He combined his athletic talent with social action during the 1960s, when both he and the black social revolution reached their peak. And the result was that he became an icon for literally millions of black Americans.”²⁶¹ Simply put, Ali had an innate understanding of how to use his gift of eloquence and the athletic platform to change the world.

Ali had a unique intelligence—not a formal education—evident of a social and emotional competence that outweighed that of his peers. Ali was dyslexic and struggled in school; however, Angelo Dundee put it appropriately when he noted, “He’s learned a lot, traveling around the world, being with all kinds of people. Little people, big people, wealthy and poor people. Life has been his college. The truth is, he never really learned from books. But he sucks in knowledge, information, and ideas just like an elephant sucks in water. And he trumpets it all out like an elephant, too.”²⁶² Ferdie Pacheco added, “Ali’s army IQ score was 78. So what! Measuring Ali’s intelligence with a standard IQ test is like trying to measure joy or love with a ruler.”²⁶³ Ali studied the blueprint of challenging white society through sport and then took it to a level that was unfathomable. He used the verbal eloquence that journalist Alex Haley claimed made Ali “the world’s wealthiest poet” to become one of the most recognized people on the

²⁶¹ Arthur Ashe quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 204.

²⁶² Angelo Dundee quoted in, Ali, *The Soul of a Butterfly*, 99.

²⁶³ Ferdie Pacheco quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [40].

planet.²⁶⁴ In so doing, Ali had the platform to work vigorously against the remnants of slavery and amplify the efforts of those who devoted their lives to black advancement in America. He yearned to move blacks to a life of positivity and to clean up their neighborhoods: “[We need to] teach [black people] to love themselves. To desire to want to be with themselves. To want to help themselves. To quit cutting the flesh and blood of [their own] people. Quit being violent, period. Let’s unite. Let’s love one another. We brothers. This is what we need. . . . If we don’t respect ourselves, nobody will respect us.”²⁶⁵ These are causes for which he worked until his passing in 2016.

The growth and evolution of Ali are what many have come to revere more than anything he ever accomplished in the ring. The characterization of Ali in the 1960s is different from what he became in the latter part of the twentieth century and in the twenty-first century. As a twenty-two year old, in 1964, Ali was a loudmouth who preached the party-line of the Black Muslims—arguing for separation of blacks and whites in order to remove African Americans from the oppression of a racist system. In essence, Ali wanted to make a positive impact on what he saw as social injustice in America. Ali knew his role in sport gave him the stage to affect change and he relished the opportunity:

There were many ways for people to participate in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s At the time, I chose to join the Nation of Islam, which promoted Black pride and independence Whatever approach you chose, the goal was the same: We all wanted freedom, justice, and equality for Black people in America. Martin Luther King Jr. made a difference. The NAACP made a

²⁶⁴ Haley, *The Playboy Interviews*, 47.

²⁶⁵ Ali quoted in *Glovesgymabc Gloves*, “An Audience with Muhammad Ali Newcastle 1977.”

difference. Rosa Parks made a difference. Malcolm X made a difference. Elijah Muhammad made a difference. I would like to think I made a difference, too.²⁶⁶

His language inspired black people across the country and the world, but left Ali in a precarious position with America's mainstream, which raises the question of how he has achieved such noble standing. It is important to see how Ali changed over time to fully understand how he reached his status. Ali openly confronted racism and served as the most popular voice of his generation—on the level with Martin Luther King. In fact, broadcaster, Howard Cosell, pronounced that nobody else “aroused so much passion during the decade of the sixties.”²⁶⁷ Reverend Jesse Jackson proclaimed, “Ali helped to internationalize black consciousness as much as anybody.”²⁶⁸ He was linked with the Nation of Islam, a militant sect, but grew from his early affiliation with the group to use religion to achieve peaceful coexistence.

Ali's interpretation of Islam developed throughout the 1960s as he became a more devoted student of his faith. By the mid-1970s he was no longer a fervent supporter of Elijah Muhammad's separatist philosophy. Ali was at this point in his life an established unifier and embraced people of all backgrounds. His spiritual growth and conversion to Sunni Islam in 1975 represented his changing feelings from militancy to hope.²⁶⁹ The milestone moment came that year when Elijah Muhammad died, giving Ali an

²⁶⁶ Ali, *The Soul of a Butterfly*, 48-49.

²⁶⁷ Howard Cosell quoted in Cesession, “Muhammad Ali and Howard Cosell Interview,” YouTube, September 1, 2012, accessed August 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hXF-uIe0pw>.

²⁶⁸ Jesse Jackson quoted in Staufenberg, “Muhammad Ali Dead.”

²⁶⁹ Roberts, “Muhammad Ali Center,” 176.

opportunity to carve out his own path of Islam. Upon Elijah Muhammad's passing, the Nation softened some stances and declared a move toward "openness."²⁷⁰ Ali became far more open-minded by 1975 when he was no longer under the grasp of Elijah Muhammad: "I don't hate whites. That was history, but it's coming to an end. We're in a new phase, a resurrection . . . We Muslims hate injustice and evil, but we don't have time to hate people."²⁷¹ The humanitarian side of Ali was always alive and clearly being released in the aforementioned moment. Furthermore, in 1984, Ali admonished the militancy of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan: "What he teaches is not at all what we believe in. He represents the time of our struggle in the dark and a time of confusion in us, and we don't want to be associated with that at all."²⁷² Even the controversial singular-minded Farrakhan acknowledged Ali's growth: "Ali was constantly evolving; constantly growing from the narrow view of the Nation of Islam in its infancy to the broad universal view of Islam in its fullest development. That's Ali."²⁷³ Ali was a man who evolved and despite his bombastic ego was aware of his imperfections. The awareness to change and move to inclusion is a primary factor for his humanitarian appeal.

Ali's heroic quality was acknowledging that his work with the Nation of Islam in the 1960s was borne out of the racial tensions of the time period. In his heart, he did not believe that whites were devils; some of his best friends and most trusted associates

²⁷⁰ Roberts and Smith, *Blood Brothers*, 309.

²⁷¹ Ali quoted in Roberts and Smith, *Blood Brothers*, 309.

²⁷² Ali quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute*, 6.

²⁷³ Louis Farrakhan quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, Netflix.

throughout his whole life were white. In short, Ali filled a critical role for black advancement that was urgently needed in the African-American community in the 1960s with the Nation of Islam serving as a powerful platform for him to do so. Ali came to understand that hatred was not the proper route to achieving progress and would have left Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam far sooner had he not feared for his safety. In November 1974, after defeating George Foreman in Zaire, Ali was in Louisville celebrating his victory. He was speaking to white reporters from the *Louisville Courier-Journal* when security members from the Nation of Islam barged in and deemed it was time to break up the conversation. At this point in Ali's life, he had the gumption to challenge the controlling nature of the Nation of Islam higher-ups; thus, he dismissed the security team and continued the interview. Ali was clearly agitated with the Black Muslims' manipulation of his life and whispered to the reporters, "I would have gotten out of this a long time ago. But you saw what they did to Malcolm X. I ain't gonna end up like Malcolm X."²⁷⁴ He was in fear of the Nation of Islam, adding, "I can't leave the [Black] Muslims. They'd shoot me, too."²⁷⁵ The defiant Ali truly believed in challenging unjustified social practices but came to understand that in order to do so people of all backgrounds could work together to achieve these goals.

Ali arrived to the conclusion that Malcolm X had made an acute decision to lead a more moderate movement once he was banished from the Nation of Islam by Elijah Muhammad. It was one of Ali's greatest regrets to have sided with Elijah Muhammad when the split took place in 1964, because Ali could have begun his work toward

²⁷⁴ Ali quoted in Roberts and Smith, *Blood Brothers*, 308.

²⁷⁵ Ali quoted in Roberts and Smith, *Blood Brothers*, 309.

solidarity far sooner and further developed one of the most instrumental friendships of his life. Ali recalled when he learned of his mentor's assassination, "I was in Miami, training, when I heard Malcolm had been shot to death. Some brother came to my apartment and told me what happened. It was a pity and a disgrace he died like that, because what Malcolm saw was right, and after he left us, we went to his way anyway."²⁷⁶ Indeed, Ali came to the conclusion in his later years that one's character mattered most and expressed immense regret over his split with Malcolm X:

Turning my back on Malcolm was one of the mistakes that I regret most in my life. I wish I'd been able to tell Malcolm I was sorry, that he was right about so many things. But he was killed before I got the chance. He was a visionary— ahead of us all. . . . Malcolm was the first to discover the truth, that color doesn't make a man a devil. It is the heart, soul, and mind that define a person. Malcolm X was a great thinker and even greater friend. I might never have become a Muslim if it hadn't been for Malcolm. If I could go back and do it over again, I would never have turned my back on him.²⁷⁷

The decision to change over time in accordance with his life's experience and education was instrumental to the greatness of Ali. Blacks and whites witnessed his growth; consequently, furthering Ali's role as an ambassador for goodwill and elevating his role in the advancement of African Americans.

Ali, in effect, reinvented himself during his fifty-plus years in the public spotlight. Just like Jack Olsen wrote in *Black Is Best: The Riddle of Cassius Clay*, Ali was an enigmatic figure in the 1960s with an assortment of ideas. Those ideas or the "jigsaw puzzle" that Ali represented evolved over time to give the world a symbol of change and peace who made immense contributions toward the effort for social justice. Ali

²⁷⁶ Ali quoted in Gregory, "Why Muhammad Ali Matters to Everyone."

²⁷⁷ Ali, *The Soul of a Butterfly*, 85.

recognized that many of the aggressive stances that he took in his youth were the product of a tumultuous time period and that in order to make progress he would have to work with people of all races and religions. As he famously said, “the man who views the world at fifty the same as he did at twenty has wasted thirty years of his life.”²⁷⁸ Ali’s life embodied the aforementioned learning. He made mistakes, he learned, and he changed. On religion, Ali gravitated to Christians and Jews. He stated, “No one should pressure another person into accepting a religion they don’t want to accept. Muslims, Christians, Jews—we all got the same God. We just serve him in different ways.”²⁷⁹ The open-mindedness of Ali was a clear example of how much he changed from the 1960s to the twenty-first century. The preeminent journalist David Halberstam eloquently touched on Ali’s changing persona:

One of the great things about this country is that you can invent yourself and reinvent yourself many times. And Ali was a true American original in every aspect of his life. I mean, really; what other country in the world could have created Muhammad Ali? If you look at his childhood, his rise, his complexity and contradictions; he’s unmistakably American. He might be a Muslim, but he’s a hell of an American too. And it speaks well for this country, not only that we created him, but also that we came to understand what he was about in time to admire him; that he’s not a prophet without honor in his own land.²⁸⁰

Halberstam cuts to the core of what made Ali great. Ali challenged racial and social injustice head-on early in his career at the expense of alienating himself from a significant segment of America’s population, and then later in life he took a tone of

²⁷⁸ Ali quoted in “A Quote by Muhammad Ali,” *Goodreads*, accessed June 30, 2016, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/41404-the-man-who-views-the-world-at-50-the-same>.

²⁷⁹ Ali quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [117].

²⁸⁰ David Halberstam quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [170].

conciliation and coalescence. The very fact that he was willing to accept past transgressions allowed for the healing that propelled his legacy.

The symbolism of Ali transcends race and that is what makes him profoundly so important in the history of black advancement. Blacks across the world took pride that one of their own achieved such revered prominence. Of course, Ali used his rhetorical genius to gain his recognition but he was also keen to the media age. For instance, a friend with whom he boxed in the Chicago Golden Gloves as a teenager remembered Ali pushing other boxers out of the way when the cameras were out so that he could be the center of attention.²⁸¹ It helped that Ali was a natural in front of the camera. Photographer Neil Leifer commented, “Ali was the perfect subject. He loved the camera, and the camera loved him.”²⁸² Artist Leroy Neiman furthered Leifer’s assessment, “Ali looked like a piece of sculpture, with no flaw or imperfection. His features and limbs were perfectly proportioned, and over the years, the way he looked never really changed.”²⁸³ The symbol of Ali—physically and personally—rose above the standard popularity of a public figure.

Ali was simply known everywhere. Press agent, Irving Rudd, once remarked, “If Ali went into a hut in Africa, a village in Asia, the outback in Australia, or a marketplace in South America, the people would look at him, smile, and say, ‘Muhammad Ali.’”²⁸⁴ Literary sports writer, John Schulian, added “There are people in the middle of Africa

²⁸¹ Maraniss, *Rome 1960*, 197.

²⁸² Neil Leifer quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [1].

²⁸³ Leroy Neiman quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [7].

²⁸⁴ Irving Rudd quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [115].

and Asia who haven't the slightest idea who the president of the United States is, but they know Muhammad Ali."²⁸⁵ Likewise, Barack Obama glowed, "He had fans in every city and village and ghetto on the planet; he was feted by foreign heads of state."²⁸⁶ Indeed, Ali was able to negotiate the release of fifteen American hostages from Iraq after traveling to the country in advance of the Gulf War in 1991. Fundamentally, Ali's experiences throughout his travels positioned him to be one of the most recognized people in the world, as he bragged in a 1975 interview, "You can go to Japan, China, all the European, African, Arab and South American countries and, man, they know me."²⁸⁷ There had been other champions in the past but no one was met with this type of veneration.

Quite possibly, the best way to assess Ali's impact on the role of African-American life is to gather a collection of commentary on his life from his contemporaries. The reflections of the many people who covered his life and have served in relevant positions during his time are moving. It is abundantly clear that he was much more than the greatest athlete of the last century. When Canadian journalist, Jack Todd, was posed with the question about who the "athlete of the century" was, he was almost incredulous:

Athlete of the century? Are you kidding? There is no one else even close. Michael Jordan and Wayne Gretzky? Great athletes who were never tested in the crucible of great conflicts, who sold their souls to Nike and ignored the sweatshops, who sold their souls to McDonald's and ignored the way their workers are treated, who became shills first and athletes second. Shame on you for even thinking that these men deserve to be compared with Ali. . . . I had many athletic heroes in my youth

²⁸⁵ John Schullian quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 453.

²⁸⁶ Obama quoted in Garunay, "President Obama's Tribute to Muhammad Ali."

²⁸⁷ Ali quoted in Gerald Early, *This Is Where I Came In: Black America in the 1960s* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 1.

. . . But there was only one Muhammad Ali, Athlete of the Century.²⁸⁸

Todd's words are a clear indication of the profound influence that Ali had beyond the athletic arena. His humanitarian value to the world was not only unparalleled in sport, but was also on the level with the great social justice fighters in history. Barack Obama, ardently stated, "[Ali was] a man who fought for what was right. A man who fought for us. He stood with King and Mandela; stood up when it was hard; spoke out when others wouldn't."²⁸⁹ Effectively, Obama lucidly understood what Ali's rhetorical drive did for America. It changed Obama's life and it changed scores of others.

Dick Gregory, the American civil rights activist and writer, believed that what Ali did for people all over the world was beyond just giving hope to the black community of America. Gregory's feelings on Ali were so strong that it would be remiss not to include his thoughts on the humanitarian impact of Ali. Gregory followed Ali's career from beginning-to-end and was also a pioneer for black activism. He commented,

There were a lot of us against the war in our way, but nobody heard us, because we didn't command the worldwide attention that Ali enjoyed. . . . had he supported the war, this planet would be an even more violent place than it is today. But instead, he taught love. He might be a prophet; a prophet of peace. Prophets come to change lives and bring the word of God into the world, and that's what Ali has done. I don't know of anyone who's had as great an impact on people as Ali. Not just black people; not just Muslims. This great monument of a human being is loved all over the world. There's no person on this planet who's had the same effect as Ali. He got our attention; he made us listen. And then he grew within people who weren't even aware that he was there. Whatever the universal God force meant for him to do, it's out of the bottle, and it isn't ever

²⁸⁸ Jack Todd quoted in Walter and Iida, "Muhammad Ali: Exemplar to the World."

²⁸⁹ Barack Obama, "Statement from President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama on the Passing of Muhammad Ali," The White House, June 4, 2016, accessed June 30, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/04/statement-president-barack-obama-and-first-lady-michelle-obama-passing>.

going back. Ali is inside all of us now, and because of him, no future generation will ever be the same.²⁹⁰

The words of Gregory are so strong that they equate the legacy of Ali to that of a Gandhi-like figure, someone who will have an eternal impact on world history. Given the state of religious affairs in the twenty-first century world, it is not a farfetched statement.

The world was struck with global shock on September 11, 2001, and the call for Ali was once again made for a humanitarian effort to bring Muslims and Christians to a common ground. Ali was possibly the one Muslim—the one American—who could potentially bring such unity. By 2001, speaking full sentences came with great difficulty to Ali, but he spoke on national television in hopes of bringing people together. He was physically shaking because of his Parkinson's disease and emotionally shaken because of the atrocities of the terror attacks. As he had spoken out years before against racism and Vietnam, Ali said, "I'm a Muslim . . . People should know the real truth about Islam . . . I wouldn't be here representing Islam if it was really like the terrorists made it look . . . Islam is peace; against killing, murder; and the terrorists and the people doing it in the name of Islam are wrong; and if I had the chance I'd do something about it."²⁹¹ Ali was especially bothered by the attacks and did not want to allow terrorism to be the bane of all who practiced Islam. Despite his declining health and inability to verbally communicate as he had in years past, he was adamant about attempting to unite people of all faiths in the heat of such calamity.

²⁹⁰ Dick Gregory quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 509.

²⁹¹ Ali quoted in Jono03, "Muhammad Ali and Will Smith," YouTube, August 5, 2006, accessed June 30, 2016, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-A8xMhAG7M>.

Four years later, Ali found himself receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George W. Bush at the White House in 2005. This was a monumental event for Ali and spoke to his true impact on the citizens of America and the world. Bush proclaimed, “Across the world, billions know Muhammad Ali as a brave, compassionate, charming man. The American people are proud to call Muhammad Ali one of our own.”²⁹² Less than forty years prior, conservative Americans had reviled Ali and he was now receiving one of the highest honors awarded to American citizens from an establishment president—a moment that was unforeseen in 1967 when he refused to submit to the Vietnam War draft. His impact on people is undeniable. At the 1996 Atlanta Olympics when Ali lit the torch with an estimated over two billion people watching, President Bill Clinton later revealed to Ali, “They didn’t tell me who would light the flame, but when I saw it was you, I cried.”²⁹³ By the time of Ali’s final days, he was unequivocally a man of all people. He began his public life exclaiming the beauty of being black and the prejudices of whites, but by his end color was no longer a dividing factor for Ali. Reporter Jerry Izenberg who covered sports for the *Newark Star Ledger* for nearly fifty years fittingly summed up Ali’s lasting impact, “People don’t really think of Ali as being black anymore. He’s one of a kind; He’s Muhammad Ali. And that’s the wonderful ultimate irony; that this man who was once viewed as a dangerous militant

²⁹² [Http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfqVGIXo-d-FkC-B0oIPpYg](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfqVGIXo-d-FkC-B0oIPpYg), “Muhammad Ali Receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George W. Bush. RIP.,” YouTube, June 4, 2016, accessed June 30, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1GV8i0sCNo>.

²⁹³ Bill Clinton quoted in Walter and Iida, “Muhammad Ali: Exemplar to the World.”

Black Nationalist revolutionary should turn out to be without color in the eyes of America.”²⁹⁴

The impact of Ali’s life was felt by African Americans in all corners—from the rural South to crowded cities. Barack Obama’s statement at Ali’s funeral encompassed his influence: “Ali chose to help perfect a union where a descendant of slaves can become the king of the world, and in the process . . . help[ed] inspire a young mixed kid with a funny name to have the audacity to believe he could be anything, even President of the United States. Muhammad Ali was America. He will always be America.”²⁹⁵ Ali left the world with a legacy of pomp and defiance intertwined with compassion and humanity. His gift of words changed African-American history and are embodied in his hopes for leaving the world a more enriched place: “I want them to put on my tombstone, ‘he took a few cups of love, one teaspoon of patience, one tablespoon of generosity, and one pint of kindness. Then he mixed it up, spread it over the span of a lifetime, and served it to each deserving person he met.’”²⁹⁶

²⁹⁴ Jerry Izenberg quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [170].

²⁹⁵ Obama quoted in Garunay, “President Obama’s Tribute to Muhammad Ali.”

²⁹⁶ Ali quoted in Hauser and Leifer, *Muhammad Ali Memories*, [170].

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