

Proud, religious, poet, truth to Power - Muhammad Ali: Free Black Man

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"I ain't got no quarrel with the Viet Cong...no Viet Cong ever called me nigger."

EVERYONE HAS A story about Muhammad Ali. For me it was as a young high school student in Detroit. I had already seen the wrongs of imperialism and its wars, and of course the racism Blacks faced in Detroit.

Ali as a Black man and Muslim was a powerful symbol of courage. His willingness to give up his boxing career to stand with the Vietnamese against the U.S. government reflected the stirrings of militant Black pride and militancy that was growing in Detroit.

As a son of a Bangladeshi Muslim father and Black mother, I understood this deeply and personally. I remember in 1969 we organized an antiwar protest at Wayne State University and a march down Woodward Avenue. The leaflet, which I created, had a big picture of a cool and fierce Ali saying those defiant words, "No Vietnamese called me Nigger."

The flyer was distributed at the college, high schools, community stores and movie theaters with positive response.

Truth to Power

Muhammad Ali spoke truth to power. Even after he became ill with Parkinson's disease and eventually lost much of his verbal skills, he stood by his militant spirit and youth. He never apologized for his words or action. He remained a symbol of resistance and a voice standing by his principles no matter the consequences.

Ali was born in segregated Louisville, Kentucky in 1942. He knew the history of racism — lived it — and understood that as a Black man he was considered by whites in his own state as second class. Yet those chains never held him back.

In 1960 after winning the gold medal as the light heavyweight champion at the Rome Olympics, he went downtown to eat at a whites-only diner. It didn't matter that he won the gold. He was still a Black man and was not served.

On April 18, 1967 he refused to be drafted into the U.S. Army. He said it was against his religious

beliefs. He was in the prime of his professional boxing career and lost easily millions of dollars. His action at a drafting center in Houston, Texas was brave and without modern precedent.

Some of the most prominent Black athletes of the day — football star Jim Brown, basketball great Lew Alcindor (later Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) and others — tried to get him to change his mind.

After a two-hour closed door meeting, Ali won them over to support his right to be a conscientious objector. In a tribute Abdul-Jabbar wrote for *Time magazine* after Ali's passing, he said, "While I admired the athlete of action, it was the man of principle who was truly my role model."

Ali told the world:

"Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on Brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights? No I'm not going 10,000 miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over. This is the day when such evils must come to an end. I have been warned that to take such a stand would cost me millions of dollars. But I have said it once and I will say it again. The real enemy of my people is here. I will not disgrace my religion, my people or myself by becoming a tool to enslave those who are fighting for their own justice, freedom and equality. If I thought the war was going to bring freedom and equality to 22 million of my people they wouldn't have to draft me, I'd join tomorrow. I have nothing to lose by standing up for my beliefs. So I'll go to jail, so what? We've been in jail for 400 years."

Michael Powell in the June 4, 2016 *New York Times* made an observation that many African Americans feel about Ali:

"I was not yet a teenager when I wandered into the living room of our rent-controlled apartment on the Upper West Side. I saw my parents sitting silently by our black-and-white television, listening as a young Black boxer, Muhammad Ali, talked."

"He was saying he would not serve in the Army and he would not fight those Vietcong.

"My conscience won't let me go and shoot them," Ali said in that rat-a-tat-tat stream-of-consciousness style of his. "They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, and they didn't put any dogs on me."

"How can I shoot those poor people?" he added. *"Just take me to jail."*

"Just take me to jail." Those words registered as astonishing. Here was this great, sexy fighter on the cusp of fame and fortune, a physically pretty man who recited doggerel and who graced the covers of magazines. And he was willing to march off to prison to protest an unjust war.

Ali understood racism and America's history of state-sanctioned and extralegal violence against African Americans. Ali's father was influenced by Marcus Garvey (a Black nationalist and Pan Africanist leader in the 1910s and '20s) and other organizations that supported Black self-help and community control, not racial integration.

Born as Cassius Clay, Ali changed his name to Cassius X and then Muhammad Ali (so named by Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam) after winning his first of three heavyweight championships in 1964. He was a friend of the greatest Black American revolutionary of the 20th century, Malcolm X. He explained his change succinctly and with poetic flourish.

"Cassius Clay is a slave name," he told everyone, "I didn't want it. I am Muhammad Ali, a free name — it means beloved of God — and I insist people use it when people speak to me and of me."

(Ironically, Ali was named after a white Kentucky Abolitionist, Cassius Marcellus Clay, who was a friend of presidents Lincoln and Grant. His point was that it was not an African name, from where his ancestors originated.)

The Nation of Islam

The outrage by the sports media to his name change exposed its deep racism. Most refused to use his new name. There was outrage that Ali would convert to Islam (a "non-American" religion) and worse, a Black Nationalist "sect."

Floyd Patterson, a former heavyweight champ said that Ali "might as well have joined the Ku Klux Klan." Many on the left, including the Communist Party, were hostile to Black Nationalism and the Nation of Islam.

Ali first met the Nation of Islam in 1961. He credits the NOI and Malcolm X in particular for his becoming a Muslim. Because of fear and hostility toward Islam and the Black separatist NOI, Ali waited until he won his 1964 championship before going public.

The NOI believed that Africans created the human race and were superior to the white race. It preached this in Elijah Muhammad's writings and its newspaper, Muhammad Speaks.

It told Black Americans to be proud of their heritage and stay separate from the white race. It did not support the civil rights goal of integration, and opposed the U.S. government's wars. At the same time, the NOI supported the right of self-defense.

The newspaper wrote and supported antiracist and anticolonial fights around the world. Because of that it was widely read beyond NOI's readership, including by socialists.

The NOI softened its opposition to boxing once Ali joined. Malcolm X urged him to present a strong voice and presence to Africans around the world. Many of Ali's principles thus came from the Nation.

Of course there were other more secular Black nationalists who advocated Black self-determination and supported a revolutionary transformation of U.S. society.

They continued to support self-determination but also advocated for socialism.

After Malcolm broke with the Elijah Muhammad in 1964, Ali stayed loyal to the NOI. (He later in the 1970s followed Malcolm's path to more orthodox Islam.) In his 2004 book *The Soul of a Butterfly: Reflections on Life's Journey*, Ali expressed his regret that he turned his back on Malcolm when he ran into him during a trip to Ghana:

"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."

"...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."

After Ali was convicted of draft evasion, he was sentenced to the maximum of five years in prison

and a \$10,000 fine, but remained free while the conviction was appealed. Many saw Ali as a draft dodger, and his popularity plummeted.

Banned from boxing for three years, Ali spoke out against the Vietnam War on college campuses. As public attitudes turned against the war, support grew for Ali. In 1970 the New York State Supreme Court ordered his boxing license reinstated, and the following year the U.S. Supreme Court overturned his conviction in a unanimous decision.

In 1984 he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Yet he didn't slow in his peace activities. Ali traveled to numerous countries, including Mexico and Morocco, to help out those in need. In 1998, he was chosen to be a United Nations Messenger of Peace because of his work in developing nations. After he became ill, he stayed out of politics except to use his fame to encourage everyone to do their best.

He did endorse Ronald Reagan for re-election as president in 1984. He had supported Jesse Jackson in the Democratic primary, and Jimmy Carter and other Democrats in previous elections. His shift to Republicans in his later years was tied to his religious beliefs. He was neither a tool of Democrats or of Republicans.

Before his death he challenged Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's anti Muslim bigotry. "We as Muslims have to stand up to those who use Islam to advance their own personal agenda," Ali told NBC News in a statement. "They have alienated many from learning about Islam. True Muslims know or should know that it goes against our religion to try and force Islam on anybody."

Black pride and determination was his biggest impact for people of African descent from Louisville to Toronto to London and cities across the world.

Poetry for the Masses

For African Americans his example of pride and freedom, strength and self-identification as nobody's tool is why he was so loved. Few Black figures in sports or other fields had such an impact.

Ali was also a linguistic product of the African-American experience — one who predated Rap music. As Henry Louis Gates Jr., a Harvard professor of literature, wrote in his June 9, 2016 *New York Times* op-ed column "Muhammad Ali: The Political Poet":

A friend asked me the other day to choose my favorite Muhammad Ali fight. "The Rumble in the Jungle," I responded. I was thinking of all the rhymes that accompanied it, from "You think the world was shocked when Nixon resigned? Wait till I whip George Foreman's behind," to the very phrase "rope-a-dope", as he named the strategy he used to defeat a superior opponent in the heat of Kinshasa. It was an athletic event but it was also a linguistic one....

"I'm not arguing that Ali should be added to the next edition of The Norton Anthology of Poetry. But I am arguing his importance to the shaping of the black poetic tradition. There was certainly a direct connection between the politics of Ali's rhyme schemes and spoken word poetry of both the Last Poets group, formed on Malcolm X Day in Harlem in 1968, and Gil Scott-Heron, who recorded his first album in 1970, a hip and a hop between them and the birth of rap music just a few years later."

A citizen of the world, Ali represents what his life became — a Free Black Man against all odds.

Malik Miah

P.S.

* "Muhammad Ali: Free Black Man". Against the Current 183, July-August 2016:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4686>