

"NO QUARREL WITH THEM VIETCONG"

Muhammad Ali's Cold War

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Boxing was an American television staple during the 1950s and into the early 1960s, with weekly national broadcasts. American cities large and small regularly staged multifight cards, often featuring local heroes. Rising up from this broad base of talent, from lighter weights up to the big men, the boxing pyramid peaked with the heavyweight champion, the pinnacle of toughness, athletic prowess, and manly violence.¹

Nationalism always attached itself easily to the ring. The most exciting matches of the nineteenth century featured an Englishman against an Irishman or an American against an Englishman or an Irishman against an American. The symbolism of two men fighting for supremacy was hard to resist. By the eve of World War II, no one had to be reminded what was at stake when Joe Louis twice battled Hitler's favorite fighter, Max Schmeling. Louis, as well as other black boxers, knew that American fans and sportswriters generally expected them to be polite and patriotic, humble, and grateful for their opportunities, model Americans. Mostly they complied.²

Cassius Clay from Louisville, Kentucky, was a promising young amateur coming up in the late 1950s. Clay's family was not poor but working class, his father a sign painter with artistic ambitions. Young Cassius was a less-than-average student who devoted himself with great discipline to training for the ring. Clay rose through the amateur ranks, won Golden Gloves championships, then won light-heavyweight gold at age eighteen at the 1960 Rome Olympics. A reporter from the Soviet Union, aware of the rising racial tensions in America,

asked Clay about winning a championship for America when blacks were barred from eating in many restaurants. "Tell your readers we got qualified people working on that problem, and I'm not worried about the outcome. To me, the USA is the best country in the world, including yours." Public relations officers from the United States Information Agency (USIA) could not have put it better: Acknowledge the problem; then point to progress. Wilma Rudolph, another black US gold medalist, said Clay wore his medal with pride all over the Olympic Village.³

Asked about his victory at an impromptu news conference when he returned home, Clay was ready with what became his signature, a poem: "To make America the greatest is my goal / So I beat the Russian and I beat the Pole." Clay went on to say, in rhyme of course, that the Italians asked him to make Rome his new home. He thanked them for their hospitality and ended his little verse, "But the U.S.A. is my country still / 'Cause they waiting to welcome me to Louisville." The poetry was unusual for an athlete, but the patriotic sentiment was exactly what was expected from the young boxer, especially in an election year bristling with tensions over foreign affairs, missile gaps, questions about weakness abroad, even intimations of treason. But nothing Clay said had anything specifically to do with the Cold War, capitalism and Communism, the United States and the Soviet Union, "freedom" and "totalitarianism." Clay's words were conventional nationalism, in no clear sense addressed to particular ideologies. Yet ten years later, he was an international symbol of resistance to colonialism and US foreign policy.⁴

Four years after Rome, Cassius Clay took the heavyweight title from Sonny Liston, an ex-con who had been a leg breaker for the mob. Odds were 7-1 against Clay the night he won the championship. Liston was not only favored to win; he was just plain favored by fans and the press. Liston had the virtue of keeping to himself, saying little, but Clay during the four years he was undefeated through the professional ranks was outrageously verbal. He continued to celebrate himself in poetry, even predicting the round in which he would knock out his opponents. Once he turned professional, he gave up all vestiges of humility and gratitude. He was a master of self-promotion, and he later revealed that he modeled himself on professional wrestlers. For an African American prizefighter, proclamations like "I am the Greatest" or "I am the King of the World" did not sit well. He clearly was a black man who did not know his place.⁵

Worse, the day after Clay defeated Liston, he confirmed the rumor that he had converted to the Nation of Islam and soon thereafter dispensed with his

"slave name," Cassius Clay. He announced to the world that henceforth he would be known as Muhammad Ali. In this era of "racial progress," of Martin Luther King, the March on Washington, and soon the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, the champion openly consorted with the radical black leaders Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad and with their militant movement that argued against racial integration. "I believe in Allah," Ali told reporters. "I don't believe in forced integration." And then, "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."⁶

That did not sit well with a very conservative guild of sportswriters. Ali's boxing style alone had raised eyebrows. Real heavyweights, most journalists believed, should be devastating punchers like Liston or, a decade earlier, Rocky Marciano. Though Ali was a big man for his era, he used his preternatural quickness more than his power. One of Ali's opponents, George Chuvalo, recalled, "He was just so damn fast. . . . He threw his punches when he was in motion. That is, he'd be out of punching range, and as he moved into range, he'd already begun to throw the punch. So if you waited until he got into range to punch back, he beat you every time." But finally it wasn't about the ring but about Ali's joining the "Black Muslims," as the Nation of Islam was disparagingly called, renouncing Christianity, endorsing black separatism, and above all, refusing to play the grateful Negro, thankful for all that America had given him.⁷

The widely syndicated sports columnist Jimmy Cannon wrote in the *New York Journal American*:

The fight racket, since its rotten beginnings, has been the red-light district of sports. But this is the first time it has been turned into an instrument of mass hate. . . . I pity Clay and abhor what he represents. In the years of hunger during the depression, the Communists used famous people the way the Black Muslims are exploiting Clay. This is a sect that deforms the beautiful purpose of religion.⁸

In other words, Clay was a dupe, exactly the sort of stooge the Communists loved; only now the puppeteer was not Nikita Khrushchev but Elijah Muhammad.

To goad Ali and deny the legitimacy of his faith, opponents, sportswriters, and many fans continued to call him Clay. When other fighters did that, like Floyd Patterson and Ernie Terrell, Ali humiliated them in the ring, carrying them round after round, cutting them up, yelling, "What's my name?" Even Ali's supporters were appalled at his cruelty, but such moments were more grist

for his detractors' mill. Two years after his first attack on Ali and the Nation of Islam, Jimmy Cannon widened his assault and, in so doing, summarized much of the animus against Ali. Cannon's was an often-quoted screed that bordered on incoherent, but his word torrent captured the uncomprehending, festering anger of the World War II generation at what we have come to think of as "the sixties":

Clay is part of the Beatle Movement. He fits in with the famous singers no one can hear and the punks riding motorcycles with iron crosses pinned to their leather jackets and Batman and the boys with their long dirty hair and the girls with the unwashed look and the college kids dancing naked at secret proms held in apartments and the revolt of students who get a check from dad every first of the month and the painters who copy the labels off soup cans and the surf bums who refuse to work and the whole pampered style-making cult of the bored young.⁹

Cannon in his rage was on to something. Ali came to embody much of the spirit of the 1960s, the iconoclasm, the rejection of authority, the worship of youth. He was even placed under surveillance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It was not as if Ali had not thought about social injustice in the years when he contemplated joining the Nation of Islam: "I'm the heavyweight champion, but right now there are some neighborhoods I can't move into. I know how to dodge booby-traps and dogs. I dodge them by staying in my own neighborhood." And then on the Nation of Islam itself: "People brand us a hate group. They say we want to take over the country. They say we're Communists. That is not true. Followers of Allah are the sweetest people in the world."¹⁰

When the real troubles came for Ali in the late 1960s, the issue of course was Vietnam. After his Olympic victory, he was eligible for the draft, which could have sent him into combat or, more likely, as boxers had done since Joe Louis, onto the entertainment circuit for overseas troops. Eighteen years old, Clay registered for the draft in 1960; in 1962 the military classified him 1-A, eligible for service; just before he won the championship in 1964, he was ordered to take military qualifying exams. Clay had finished high school, but he was a poor student. His military intelligence tests put him in the sixteenth percentile. Tested again a few months later by three psychologists, he still came in below their 30 percent threshold. The army reclassified him 1-Y, not eligible for service. Sportswriters and fans grumbled and asked why this consummate fighter could earn big paydays in the ring and then avoid service while other men bled and died in combat. As the war ramped up and ever-more soldiers

were needed, the army lowered its intelligence standards, and early in 1966, Clay—now Muhammad Ali—was reclassified 1-A.¹¹

Reporters deluged him with questions on the day of this announcement. Robert Lipsyte, who was with Ali at that moment, remembered him as a naïve young man, not particularly attuned to world politics, one who had thought that his worries about Vietnam were behind him. Now suddenly the army's announcement put his life and career in jeopardy again. Reporters kept calling, questions kept coming for hours, about the war, Lyndon Johnson, the Vietcong. Ali became more and more agitated. "Finally," Lipsyte remembered, "after the tenth call—'What do you think about the Vietcong?'—Ali exploded. 'Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong.' And bang. There it was. That was the headline. That was what the media wanted." The champ was front-page news; his opponent, the United States of America.¹²

Lipsyte, one of the most sympathetic reporters covering Muhammad Ali, and certainly the most thoughtful, felt that Ali's Vietcong remark was the sincere expression of a frightened and harassed young man, not the summation of some deeper political analysis, which came only with time. Lipsyte was right if we are thinking narrowly about Vietnam. Still, Ali never backtracked from the words he blurted out that afternoon:

Keep asking me, no matter how long,
On the war in Vietnam,
I sing this song,
I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong.¹³

Ali's political ideas came out of his lived experience. Looking back on his boyhood, he invoked a famous name from the Freedom Struggle's past: "Emmett Till and I were about the same age. A week after he was murdered in Sunflower County, Mississippi, I stood on the corner with a gang of boys, looking at pictures of him in the black newspapers and magazines. In one, he was laughing and happy. In the other, his head was swollen and bashed in, his eyes bulging out of their sockets and his mouth twisted and broken. His mother had done a bold thing. She refused to let him be buried until hundreds of thousands marched past his open casket in Chicago and looked down at his mutilated body." Till was murdered in 1955, but the story kept taking on meaning for Ali as he thought about it through the years: "Emmett Till was the same age as me, and even though they caught the men who did it, nothing happened to them. Things like that went on all the time. And in my own life, there were

places I couldn't go, places I couldn't eat. 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." In disgust, Ali claimed years later, he threw his gold medal in the Ohio River.¹⁴

Clay was twelve years old when the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, desegregating, at least on paper, Southern schools. A year later came Emmett Till's lynching and, a month later, the murderers' acquittal. Three months after that, the Montgomery Bus Boycott began. Cold War rhetoric had been intense through the 1950s, the witch hunts, the Hollywood Ten, Joseph McCarthy's accusations, the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee, the trials of Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs, and so forth. While civil rights and the Cold War seem distinct, the two were closely linked.¹⁵

If you were coming of age as Cassius Clay was during the 1950s, and if you were black and living in a border state such as Kentucky and paying any attention at all, you likely would be more familiar with the Cold War through racial issues than foreign policy ones. A young man like Clay would have seen in the newspapers and heard on the radio that Communists, outside agitators, and "Reds" were stirring up the black folks. It was a commonplace of Southern journalism that uppity blacks and white radicals were determined to destroy "the Southern way of life." Senators like James Eastland of Mississippi spoke of the Communist influence over the Supreme Court in the *Brown* decision; organizations that tried to register blacks to vote were tarred with the red brush; efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People at desegregation were routinely dismissed as Communist inspired. Simply put, Red-baiting was an effective tool against the Freedom Struggle. The White Citizens Council's founding document, a little book called *Black Monday* by Mississippi circuit judge Tom Brady, took it as an article of faith that Communists were behind civil rights agitation. Anti-integration and anti-Communism were cut from the same cloth; Red hunting followed the Freedom Struggle like night follows day.¹⁶

But it worked in reverse too. Beginning in the 1950s, the USIA was at pains to dispel the image of America wracked by racial turmoil. Decolonization movements swept Africa and Asia during these years, and winning the hearts and minds of nations freeing themselves from European domination became crucial in the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. Propaganda wars were fought over which superpower was the real friend of darker-skinned peoples. Every racial atrocity at home—every lynching, every "segregation

forever" speech, every enforcement of white supremacy—made it harder to sell America as the world's beacon of freedom. The Emmett Till case that Ali remembered so vividly was a perfect example. After Till's death and the exoneration of his killers, a series of mass rallies, organized by civil rights groups, labor unions, and churches, broke out across the country. Again and again, speakers stressed that racism played into the hands of America's enemies, that we could not pretend to leadership of the "free world" while oppressing our own people, that we had everything to lose to the Communists. The acquittal of Till's killers in Sumner, Mississippi, in September 1955 brought a flood of outraged news stories throughout the world, questioning America's commitment to freedom and equality. The USIA did its best to minimize the damage with stories about racial progress and human brotherhood, but it is clear that the Cold War was emphatically entwined with racial politics.¹⁷

As the Vietnam War ramped up and the Selective Service forced Ali to think about the draft, his frame of reference was race, and he came to understand events in Southeast Asia through that prism. American involvement, its proponents argued, would stop Communist aggression in the Pacific. To fight in Vietnam was to defend America against a metastatic threat. Opponents of the war believed that US troops unwittingly did the Communists' bidding by making us into defenders of imperialism and oppressors of colored peoples. At first, young Ali was mostly disinterested in all of this; foreign policy, falling dominoes, and diplomatic chess little colored his thinking. But as he trained to become heavyweight champion through the early 1960s, race and the Cold War grew ever more closely linked for African Americans. Civil rights opponents even depicted the long successful struggles for passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as Communist victories. Ali would have been unusual if he *did not* think about Vietnam through the prism of American racial politics.¹⁸

By 1966 he had also imbibed ideas from the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X. These were outlaw names, not only for most white Americans but also for blacks. The popular media often characterized the religion as little more than a hate group. The Black Muslims, as the press often referred to them, were critically aware of American racial politics, but their strategy was withdrawal, separate religions, businesses, and neighborhoods—segregation, not integration. Racism at home and imperialism abroad dictated an autonomous black world, uncontaminated by the evils of white men. The Nation of Islam was explicit about war—Elijah Muhammad went to jail for

resisting the draft during World War II, and he insisted that his followers remain loyal to Allah, not the racist federal government. That meant not participating in imperialist wars against dark-skinned people. Equally important, decolonization was the order of the day throughout the Third World, including Muslim countries, so solidarity with the Islamic world and staunch anti-imperialism became part of the Nation of Islam's creed.¹⁹

Critics asked, Who was this semiliterate boxer, seduced by a cult religion, to have an opinion? Even his defenders, such as Lipsyte or TV commentator Howard Cosell, felt that when all of this began with Ali's reclassification to 1-A in 1966, the champ was callow and uninformed. Back in Rome in 1960, he seemed mostly ignorant of the stakes in international sport, and now he was ignorant of how Cold War superpowers jockeyed for influence. Certainly, he would have been hard pressed to articulate the ins and outs of politics, diplomacy, and warfare as well as, say, Secretary of State Dean Rusk or Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. "I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong" was literally the truth, ignorance that was wisdom, ignorance mercifully free of the mad logic of Vietnam and the Cold War.²⁰

What Ali came to believe instead, no doubt under the tutelage of the Nation of Islam, was that his fame was an opportunity, that at twenty-four years of age he was a role model for the abstemious life of a Muslim (something he never quite got the hang of). In a remarkably rapid transformation from the parochial kid from Louisville, Ali became a "race man," that old phrase denoting one devoted to the betterment of African Americans. "Boxing is nothing," he told Robert Lipsyte in 1966, "just satisfying some bloodthirsty people." Of course, Ali loved the narcotic of the ring, went far too many years before he gave it up, but he also had a larger vision now: "I'm no longer a Cassius Clay, a Negro from Kentucky, I belong to the world, the black world, I'll always have a home in Pakistan, in Algeria, in Ethiopia." A month later he told Lipsyte, "In a few hours I could fly to another country. In the East, in Africa, where the people love me. Millions all over the world want to see me. I'm not going to sell my manhood for a few dollars, and a smile. I'd rather be poor and free than rich and a slave." Real manhood meant not a champion's money and success but solidarity with his people, African Americans as well as people of color throughout the old colonial world.²¹

Over the next year, Ali entered the ring several times, now managed by Main Bout, which consisted mostly of his Nation of Islam brothers, one more cause for white opprobrium. Arranging matches became increasingly difficult

in the United States; no sooner would boxing promoters express interest in a particular city than the mayor or even the governor intervened. Politicians such as Chicago's Richard J. Daley wanted nothing but distance from the Nation of Islam and Vietnam draft resisters. Still, Main Bout arranged half a dozen commercially successful closed-circuit fights, including two in England, one in Germany, and one in Canada. Fighting roughly every two months, Ali defeated all of his serious opponents.²²

Finally, on April 28, 1967, he was ordered to report to an induction center in Houston, Texas. Through his attorneys, he insisted he was a Nation of Islam minister and a conscientious objector, which meant he opposed all wars, not just the one in Vietnam. He maintained that as a Muslim, his life belonged to Allah, not the US government. Clearly, he had given much thought to his situation, and he began to articulate his position with more depth. He addressed a meeting in Louisville:

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 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.²³

The Johnson administration said the war was to save South Vietnam and other Asian nations from succumbing to the Communists; like a line of dominoes, when one fell, the others must go down too. Ali never engaged the "domino theory"; he simply ignored it, no doubt found it unworthy of refutation. The war was, as he put it, about white men sending black men to kill yellow men. Ali went on,

I have been warned that to take such a stand would put my prestige in jeopardy and could cause me to lose millions of dollars. . . . But I have said it once and I will say it again. The real enemy of my people is right 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 going to war was going to 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 for my beliefs. So I'll go to jail. We've been in jail for four hundred years.²⁴

The key line is "the real enemy of my people is right here." Communism, the Cold War, the Soviet threat, the Vietcong were all distractions from the main issue or, maybe more precisely, masks that once ripped away, revealed the real enemy.

Twenty-six young men had been summoned to Houston's induction center on April 28. Each was asked to take a step forward when his name was called. They all did, except Muhammad Ali. Afterward, he told reporters in a prepared written statement that rather than go to jail or the army, he would fight in court for justice. An hour later, the New York State Athletic Commission withdrew his license and his title. Other states followed suit, taking away his livelihood, all of this without a shadow of due process, before any legal action—any indictment, let alone conviction—was handed down; Ali could not fight anywhere in the United States. Finally, he was arraigned on May 8 and released on bond. Deeming him a flight risk, the federal government forced him to surrender his passport so he could not fight overseas either.²⁵

In June 1967, a Houston jury convicted Ali of violating the draft laws. He remained out on bail while his attorneys appealed, but there was every reason to think that he would end up serving at least part of his five-year sentence in a federal prison. For four years, the prime of his athletic life, Ali was not allowed to enter the prize ring—to practice his livelihood—while the legal process ground on. Men with criminal records and mob connections like Sonny Liston never much troubled the ethical beliefs of state athletic commissions or sports journalists. But Ali's political stance and his association with the Nation of Islam, with black separatism, and with opponents of America's foreign policy landed him in sporting purgatory.²⁶

He became a public speaker, made a living on college campuses, and gave more than two hundred talks. He highlighted the irony of going to Vietnam to liberate others: "I'm expected to go overseas to help free people in South Vietnam, and at the same time my people here are being brutalized and mistreated." He bemoaned that the government had stripped him of his license and title, making it impossible to earn a living: "You read about these things in the dictatorship countries." He said things that upset people, especially progressives who supported his stance on the war. Staying in line with the Nation of Islam teachings, he spoke out for a separate black homeland: "Why don't we get

out and build our own nation and quit begging for jobs? We want a country." He denounced intermarriage: "No intelligent black man or black woman in his or her right black mind wants white boys and white girls coming to their homes to marry their black sons and daughters to produce little pale half-white green-eyed blond headed Negroes. . . . You want your child to look like you." Integration was not the answer: "It's like we don't hate a tiger; but we know that a tiger's nature is not compatible with people's nature since tigers love to eat people. So we don't want to live with tigers. It's the same with the white man. The white race attacks black people. . . . So we don't want to live with the white man; that's all." And he upheld principle over money: "I could make millions if I led my people the wrong way, to something I know is wrong. . . . Damn the money. Damn the heavyweight championship. I will die before I sell out my people for the white man's money." Robert Lipsyte recalled that remarks like these sometimes offended his admirers. "Liberals who adored him for opposing the war were appalled by his sexist attitude toward women and his antigay sentiments. Blacks who applauded his battles against racism cringed every time he mocked Joe Frazier as a gorilla." Yet as Lipsyte observed, Ali, half-baked Nation of Islam theology and all, opened windows onto otherwise taboo subjects, saw the world afresh.²⁷

Would Ali have gone to jail? Those who knew him said yes, he was prepared to do it. When he fought George Chuvalo in Toronto months before his scheduled induction, the possibility of taking refuge in Canada came up; he refused. Most people thought some compromise would be reached with the armed services, the usual star tour, but Ali apparently was not interested in that either. "I'm being tested by Allah," he said. "If I pass this test, I'll come out stronger than ever. I've got no jails, no power, no government, but six hundred million Muslims are giving me strength. Why can't I worship as I want to in America? All I want is justice. Will I have to get that from History?" And it wasn't just millions of Muslims worldwide or black nationalists in America. With time, a range of African American activists, from Martin Luther King and John Lewis to H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael, stood with him. All became convinced that Vietnam and the Freedom Struggle were of a piece, especially given the federal government's war on dissent.²⁸

Prominent African American athletes spoke out for him too. Jim Brown was the star running back for the Cleveland Browns, one of the most famous football players in America. He also had become a vocal advocate of black rights and black business and a partner in Main Bout. Brown gathered a small

group of athletes together in his office just before the Houston trial. Some disagreed with Ali's stance against the draft, a few might have hoped to change his mind, but before the meeting ended, all agreed to stand with Ali and, by their presence, to persuade other African Americans to support the champ. "But Ali didn't need our help," recalled Lou Alcindor, a college basketball star who years later converted to Islam and changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, "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." Bill Russell, perhaps the greatest professional basketball player of the 1960s, was there too: "I envy Muhammad Ali," he said a few days after the meeting. "He faces a possible five years in jail and he has been stripped of his heavyweight championship, but I still envy him. He has something I have never been able to attain and something very few people I know possess. He has an absolute and sincere faith. I'm not worried about Muhammad Ali. He is better equipped than anyone I know to withstand the trials in store for him. What I'm worried about is the rest of us."²⁹

History vindicated Muhammad Ali. Most Americans today consider his life heroic, so it takes some effort to remember just how reviled he was in the 1960s, how rare his defenders were. Ali's lawyers argued his case all the way to the US Supreme Court, which handed down a decision on June 28, 1971. By that late date, half a million American troops had been on the ground in Vietnam for more than two years. The war escalated and escalated between Ali's first protest and the second year of the Nixon administration; thousands of American casualties became tens of thousands, bombing and troop movements expanded into Laos and Cambodia, and hundreds of thousands of Asians died. Protests and violence on college campuses grew routine, not just at Berkeley and Columbia and Wisconsin, but even at places like Miami of Ohio and the University of Alabama. Opinion polls indicated that most Americans now thought the war a mistake.³⁰

With all that as background, the Supreme Court unanimously reversed Ali's Houston conviction, effectively dismissing all charges against him. The grounds were extremely narrow, purely procedural, not at all the endorsement of freedom of religion and conscience Ali had stood for. Rather, the court focused on the Houston Draft Board's failure four years earlier to make clear precisely why it rejected Ali's claim to conscientious objector status. Several of the justices were willing to see Ali go to jail, his conviction stand, but even they now lacked enthusiasm for the war. The procedural compromise garnered an 8-0 vote by

avoiding the largest issues, especially the legitimacy of the Nation of Islam's claim on conscientious objector status.

After his state boxing licenses were restored, Ali fought his way back to the championship in the 1970s with a series of epic battles, against Joe Frazier, George Foreman, Ken Norton, and others, leaving no doubt that he was one of the greatest athletes of the twentieth century, *the* greatest, as he had long insisted. But as his friend Jim Brown said, Ali was much more. Thinking back on the late 1960s, Brown remembered, "He was above sports; he was part of history. The man used his athletic ability as a platform to project himself right up there with world leaders, taking chances that absolutely no one else took, going after things that very few people have the courage to go after." Brown compared later black athletes and entertainers to Ali, criticizing their unwillingness to take controversial stands on hard social and political issues. "These guys today are babies," Brown concluded; "Ali was a man."³¹

Bob Arum, an attorney-turned-boxing promoter, helped arrange some of Ali's matches before the suspension. Arum believed that Ali's opposition to the war in Vietnam was wrong and said he was "appalled" by the champ's refusal to be inducted into the army. Arum supported the war, called himself a "patriot." Years later, having changed his opinion on Vietnam, he reflected on Ali's stance: "It turned out he was right. It's amazing, really. Here he was, not an educated guy and certainly not at all knowledgeable about politics. And to my everlasting surprise, he was right about so many things where he didn't appear to have the background to know what he was talking about." Civil rights leader Julian Bond put it a little differently. He noted how divided the movement had become when Ali took his stand back in 1967: older more conservative leaders wishing not to upset powerful political allies all the way up to the president, but others, like Martin Luther King and Bond himself, coming out against the war. Ali, Bond noted, had not been part of those civil rights circles. Ali made up his own mind. "He was simply a guy," Bond remembered, "not sophisticated, not well-learned, not an expert in foreign policy, but someone who knew right from wrong and was willing to risk his career for it. I look back on that time, and I feel very strongly that Ali is part of every American's heritage. Every American should view him with pride and love."³²

Ali took his stand on Vietnam at one of the hottest moments in the Cold War, not despite his so-called ignorance but because of it—more precisely, his ignorance of Cold War logic. He stood outside that logic for most of his life and paid it little attention; then when he could no longer avoid it, he zeroed in

on how unjustly and arbitrarily Cold War ideology and rhetoric were used as a stick to beat anyone who got out of line, especially anyone who got out of line regarding black rights. He was not well educated in a formal sense, but he was thoughtful about his experience as a black man in America. That gave him the opportunity to attain moral vision. He seized that opportunity, refusing to do what was easy or expedient. He explored his conscience and then followed it.

There would be a lot to criticize Muhammad Ali for in subsequent years. He talked about the sacredness of the Muslim family, yet faithfulness to his wives eluded him; a race man, he made vicious racist remarks against his opponents, especially Joe Frazier; he remained loyal to Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam long after others questioned their half-baked theology, their cavalier attitude to Islamic orthodoxy, and their assassination of Malcolm X. After his boxing career ended, Ali shilled for large corporations and for sleazy politicians. He let himself be transformed from a pariah into an America hero by denaturing his own message, letting himself be made into a symbol of love, togetherness, and tolerance, the sharp political critique now drained away. All of this is true, but it does not detract from the wisdom and courage he displayed over civil rights and Vietnam.³³

Let me end on a personal note. I was in high school back in the late 1960s, a good student from a modest family of Roosevelt Democrats. I liked Ali from the time he became champ but disagreed with his stand in 1967. It was not that I bought the whole Cold War package—far from it. Anti-Communism always seemed crazy, surreal to me, and I was well aware of its abuses of civil liberties in the 1950s. Still, I listened to the arguments from the Johnson administration and half-believed them. I did not like the war, but the Great Society had accomplished so much; the president's inner circle seemed so polished and self-assured. Mostly I was just intellectually and morally lazy, not paying attention. A college deferment awaited me, so I was not forced, like Ali, to confront the war.

Finally I was startled awake by events in 1968. Mixed in with all the rebellion and repression of those days was the growing realization that Ali had been right all along. He rejected the "wisdom" of the experts, renounced everything, prepared to go to jail. Yes, it started with self-interest, a young man angry that his life and career were being upended. But in that exigency, he chose to educate himself, and he began that process with the tools at hand, a set of memories and ideas that came not from the foreign policy establishment and educated elites but from his community and his experiences as a black man in America.

Tuning out what officials said about Vietnam and the Cold War allowed him to develop his own insights. He took his stand and made it a little easier for the rest of us to do so too. It took far longer than it should have, but it mattered to me that Ali was talking sense as the world created by the best and the brightest went mad. Thus the champ, whom the army said had an IQ of 78, schooled the scholarship boy.

PART II

THE SOVIET UNION

International Olympic Committee Archives, Lausanne, Switzerland; Harry Carpenter, "Hungary Out of Melbourne Olympics," *Daily Mail*, October 29, 1956, p. 11.

37. Robert E. Rinehart, "'Fists Flew and Blood Flowed': Symbolic Resistance and International Response in Hungarian Water Polo at the Melbourne Olympics, 1956," *Journal of Sport History* 23, no. 2 (1996): 131; Ian Jobling, "Strained Beginnings and Friendly Farewells: The Games of the XVI Olympiad Melbourne, 1956," *Stadion* 21–22 (1995–1996): 259.

38. Rider, *Cold War Games*, 114–116.

39. George Telegdy, "Operation Griffin," "Melbourne" folder, Box 2, Szápáry Papers.

40. André Laguerre, "Down a Road Called Liberty," *Sports Illustrated*, December 17, 1956, pp. 14–15.

41. Telegdy, "Operation Griffin."

42. Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees During the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 45, 65–66, 70; Michael Gill Davis, "The Cold War, Refugees, and U.S. Immigration Policy, 1952–1965" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1996), 128–133.

43. See, for instance, telephone conversation between Jackson and Tracy Voorhees, December 7, 1956, "Log—1956" folder, Box 69 (4), C. D. Jackson Papers, DDEL.

44. Cable from *Sports Illustrated* to Telegdy, December 18, 1956, "Sports Illustrated—Hungarian Olympic Team Defectors" folder, Box 104, C. D. Jackson Papers, DDEL.

45. Emese Ivan and Dezső Iván, "The 1956 Revolution and the Melbourne Olympics: The Changing Perceptions of a Dramatic Story," *Hungarian Studies Review* 35, no. 1–2 (2008): 16–17.

46. Letter from George Telegdy to John Matthews, ca. January–February 1960, "Free Europe Committee, 1960" folder, Box 53 (3), C. D. Jackson Papers, DDEL.

47. For more on US cultural infiltration, see Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*.

48. Letter from Leslie S. Brady to Elmer B. Staats, January 13, 1956, "OCB 353.8: Amusements and Athletics, June 1954–April 1956" folder, Box 112 (2), WHO NSC Papers, DDEL.

49. Tom Braden, "I'm Glad the CIA Is 'Immoral,'" *Saturday Evening Post*, May 20, 1967, p. 14.

CHAPTER 2

1. On boxing and early television, see Randy Roberts, "The Wide World of Muhammad Ali: The Politics and Economics of Televised Boxing," in *Muhammad Ali: The People's Champ*, ed. Elliott J. Gorn (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 24–39. Carlo Rotella, *Cut Time: An Education at the Fights* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), is an excellent set of essays on the culture of the ring. See also Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 98–149.

2. Lewis A. Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

3. Quoted in Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali, His Life and Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 28–30. Hauser's book, it should be noted, is a compendium of sources. Long passages from oral interviews and news stories are interspersed with Hauser's prose, the whole knit together as a biography of Ali and his times. While its depiction of the champ is a bit glowing, the book remains the single indispensable work on his life and times.

4. *Ibid.*, 29–30; see also Michael Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 10–13.

5. Ali often used the phrases "I'm the greatest," and "I'm king of the world," most notably on the night he won the Heavyweight Championship against Sonny Liston. Ali called his autobiography *The Greatest*, and David Remnick took *King of the World* for the title of his Ali biography. See Muhammad Ali with Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (New York: Random House, 1975), 120–123; and David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (New York: Vintage, 1998), xvi. For more on the fight, see Remnick, *King of the World*, 125–159; Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 56–80; and Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 80–89.

6. Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 81–83. For the larger context, see Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith, *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship Between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 1–21, 202–209; David K. Wiggins, "Victory for Allah: Muhammad Ali, the Nation of Islam, and American Society," in Gorn, *The People's Champ*, 88–93; Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 83–112; Remnick, *King of the World*, 125–135, 163–172, 205–218; and Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1999), 53–61.

7. Ezra, *Making of an Icon*, 62–66; Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 149.

8. Cannon, quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 104.

9. *Ibid.*, 145–146; Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 140–142; Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 161–166.

10. Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 82. For a discussion on how Ali became an emblem of the wider social, cultural, and political causes of the era, see Jeffrey T. Sammons, "Rebel with a Cause: Muhammad Ali as Sixties Protest Symbol," in Gorn, *The People's Champ*, 154–180.

11. Thomas R. Hietala, "Muhammad Ali and the Age of Bare-Knuckle Politics," in Gorn, *The People's Champ*, 125–142; Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 82.

12. Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 144–145. See also Remnick, *King of the World*, 285–287; and Wiggins, "Victory of Allah," 98–99.

13. Sammons, "Rebel with a Cause," 165; see also Remnick, *King of the World*, 285–288; and Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 179.

14. Ali and Durham, *The Greatest*, 34; see also Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 89; Gerald Early, "Some Preposterous Propositions from the Heroic Life of Muhammad Ali: A Reading of *The Greatest: My Own Story*," in Gorn, *The People's Champ*, 70–87.

15. For an informal history of the 1950s, see David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994); for a broad synthesis, see James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

16. Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Peggy M. Von Eschen, *Race and Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Tom P. Brady, *Black Monday* (Winona, MS: Citizens Councils, 1954).
17. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 79-114.
18. *Ibid.*, 241-248.
19. Wiggins, "Victory for Allah," 90-102; Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 174-177.
20. Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 98-110.
21. Robert Lipsyte, "Children Bring Joy to World-Weary Champion," *New York Times*, February 20, 1966, p. S3; Robert Lipsyte, "Clay Says He Is a Jet Airplane and All the Rest Are Prop Jobs," *New York Times*, March 25, 1966, p. 49. Mike Ezra's *Muhammad Ali* takes up the issue of Ali as a race man on pages 120-129; see also Remnick, *King of the World*, 288.
22. Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 98-113.
23. *Ibid.*, 125; Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 213-216.
24. Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 125; Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 215. A shortened version of this long quotation is in Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 167.
25. Remnick, *King of the World*, 289-291; Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 171-176.
26. Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 226-227; Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 179-181.
27. Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 187-190.
28. Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 125-131; Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 167.
29. Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 177-179. See also Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, 225-226. On the Freedom Struggle and sport, see Othello Harris, "Muhammad Ali and the Revolt of the Black Athlete," in Gorn, *The People's Champ*, 54-69.
30. The literature on the Vietnam War and antiwar protests is enormous, but a few classic titles include Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1997); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright and Shining Lie* (New York: Vintage, 1989); Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Vintage, 1991); and David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993).
31. Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 201-202. See also Michael Oriard, "Muhammad Ali: The Hero in the Age of Mass Media," in Gorn, *People's Champ*, 6-23.
32. Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 181-182, 186-187.
33. Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 137-197, presents an acute assessment of Ali after his fighting days.

CHAPTER 3

1. "Visit of Alexei Kosygin," November 16, 1971 (appended to letter from Arthur Laing [Minister of Public Works] to Mitchell Sharp [Secretary of State for External Affairs], November 23, 1971), File 20-USSR-9-KOSYGIN, pt. 4, vol. 9302, Record Group (RG) 25, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa.
2. See, e.g., Bruce Muirhead, *Dancing Around the Elephant: Creating a Prosperous Canada in an Era of American Dominance, 1957-1973* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 123-244.

3. Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 140-141; Donald Macintosh and Michael Hawes, *Sport and Canadian Diplomacy* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994), 28-31; Donald Macintosh and Donna Greenhorn, "Hockey Diplomacy and Canadian Foreign Policy," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28, no. 2 (1993): 96-112; Szymon Szemberg and Andrew Podnieks, "Protesting Amateur Rules, Canada Leaves International Hockey," 2008, previously available at <http://www.iihf.com/iihf-home/the-iihf/100-year-anniversary/100-top-stories/story-17>.
4. On the role of hockey in the Soviet crackdown ("normalization") following the August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, see Oldrich Tuma, Mikhail Prozumenshikov, John Soares, and Mark Kramer, "The (Inter-Communist) Cold War on Ice: Soviet-Czechoslovak Ice Hockey Politics, 1967-1969," ed. James G. Hershberg, *Cold War International History Project Working Paper 69*, February 2014, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHP_working_paper_69_soviet-czechoslovak_ice_hockey_politics_web_o.pdf; and Lawrence Martin, *The Red Machine: The Soviet Quest to Dominate Canada's Game* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1990), 89-96.
5. "World Ice Hockey Championships (IIHF)," memorandum no. 125 from Berne (James A. Roberts) to Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, Ottawa, May 3, 1971, File 55-26-HOCKEY, pt. 15, vol. 10920, RG 25, LAC; "Canada-USSR Hockey Relations," April 19, 1971, File 55-26-HOCKEY, pt. 15, vol. 10920, RG 25, LAC.
6. "Soviet Captain Wants Canada on Ice," *Washington Post*, March 31, 1971, p. D3.
7. Robert Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion: Canada and the World, 1945-1984* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 313-314; see also Robert A. D. Ford, *Our Man in Moscow: A Diplomat's Reflections on the Soviet Union* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 119; and Charles A. Ruud, *The Constant Diplomat: Robert Ford in Moscow* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2009), 113.
8. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, *Memoirs* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), 206-208; see also Ford, *Our Man in Moscow*, 120-121; and J. L. Granatstein and Robert Bothwell, *Pirouette: Pierre Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 193.
9. Granatstein and Bothwell, *Pirouette*, 193. On Kosygin, see Ford, *Our Man in Moscow*, 77-78; and Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 194-195.
10. Robert Ford, telegram 2339, August 19, 1971, quoted in "Kosygin Visit—Soviet Objectives," September 13, 1971, enclosed with V. G. Turner, "Kosygin Visit," letter to Canadian Embassy, Moscow, September 16, 1971, in File 20-USSR-9-KOSYGIN, pt. 1, vol. 9302, RG 25, LAC; see also Ford, *Our Man in Moscow*, 123-124.
11. "Kosygin Visit—Soviet Objectives," September 13, 1971, File 20-USSR-9-KOSYGIN, pt. 1, vol. 9302, RG 25, LAC.
12. Anatoli Tarasov, "Let a Puck Settle All Problems," *Sovetskii sport*, September 4, 1971, translated in R. Murray, "Soviet-Canadian Hockey Relations," memorandum no. 687, October 14, 1971, File 55-26-HOCKEY, pt. 16, vol. 10920, RG 25, LAC. On Tarasov