

# The Importance of Muhammad Ali

by Thomas Hauser



*Muhammad Ali in Chicago, Illinois, March 1974. (National Archives and Records Administration)*

Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr., as Muhammad Ali was once known, was born in Louisville, Kentucky, on January 17, 1942—a time when blacks were the servant class in Louisville. They held jobs such as tending the backstretch at Churchill Downs (the famous race track where the Kentucky Derby is held) and cleaning other people’s homes. In Louisville in the 1940s, the highest career goal that most black people could realistically set for their children was that they join the clergy or teach at an all-black public school. Ali’s father, Cassius Marcellus Clay Sr., supported a wife and two sons by painting billboards and signs. Ali’s mother, Odessa Grady Clay, worked on occasion as a household domestic.

“I remember one time when Cassius was small,” Mrs. Clay later recalled. “We were downtown at a five-and-ten-cents store. He wanted a drink of water, and they wouldn’t give him one because of his color. That really affected him. He didn’t like that at all, being a child and thirsty. He started crying, and I said, ‘Come on; I’ll take you someplace and get you some water.’ But it really hurt him.”

When Cassius Clay was twelve years old, his bike was stolen. That led him to take up boxing under the tutelage of a Louisville policeman named Joe Martin. Clay advanced through the amateur ranks, won a gold medal at the age of eighteen at the 1960 Olympics in Rome, and turned professional under the guidance of the Louisville Sponsoring Group, a syndicate comprised of eleven wealthy white men.

In the early stages of his professional career, Cassius Clay was more highly regarded for his charm and personality than for his ring skills. He told the world that he was “the Greatest,” but the brutal realities of boxing seemed to indicate otherwise.

Then, on February 25, 1964, at age twenty-two, Clay knocked out Charles “Sonny” Liston in one of the most stunning upsets in sports history to become heavyweight champion of the world. Two days later, he shocked the world again by announcing that he had accepted the teachings of a black separatist religion known as the Nation of Islam. On March 6, 1964, he took the name “Muhammad Ali,” which was given to him by his spiritual mentor, Elijah Muhammad.

For the next three years, Ali dominated boxing as thoroughly and magnificently as any fighter ever. But outside the ring, his persona was being sculpted in ways that were even more important. “My first impression of Cassius Clay,” author Alex Haley later recalled, “was of someone with an

incredibly versatile personality. You never knew quite where he was in psychic posture. But he had a belief in himself and convictions far stronger than anybody dreamed he would.”

As the 1960s grew more tumultuous, Ali became a lightning rod for dissent in America. His message of black pride and resistance to white domination was on the cutting edge of the era. Not everything he preached was wise, and Ali himself later rejected some of the beliefs that he adhered to then. One might find an allegory for his life in a remark he once made to fellow 1960 Olympian Ralph Boston. “I played golf,” Ali said. “And I hit the thing long, but I never knew where it was going.”

Sometimes, though, Ali knew precisely where he was going. On April 28, 1967, citing his religious beliefs, he refused induction into the United States Army at the height of the war in Vietnam. Ali’s refusal followed a blunt statement, voiced fourteen months earlier: “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong.” And the American establishment responded with a vengeance, demanding, “Since when did war become a matter of personal quarrels? War is duty. Your country calls; you answer.”

On June 20, 1967, Ali was convicted of refusing induction into the United States Armed Forces and sentenced to five years in prison. Four years later, his conviction was overturned unanimously by the US Supreme Court. But in the interim, he was stripped of his title and barred from fighting for three-and-a-half years. “He did not believe he would ever fight again,” Ali’s wife at the time, Belinda Ali, said of her husband’s “exile” from boxing. “He wanted to, but he truly believed that he would never fight again.”

Meanwhile, Ali’s impact was growing—among black Americans, among those who opposed the war in Vietnam, among all people with grievances against “the system.”

“It’s hard to imagine that a sports figure could have so much political influence on so many people,” civil rights activist Julian Bond observed. Jerry Izenberg of the *Newark Star-Ledger* confirmed Bond’s observation when he recalled the scene in October 1970, when at long last Ali was allowed to return to the ring:

About two days before the fight against Jerry Quarry, it became clear to me that something had changed. Long lines of people were checking into the hotel. They were dressed differently than the people who used to go to fights. I saw men wearing capes and hats with plumes, and women wearing next-to-nothing at all. Limousines were lined up at the curb. Money was being flashed everywhere. And I was confused, until a friend of mine who was black said to me, “You don’t get it. Don’t you understand? This is the heavyweight champion who beat The Man. The Man said he would never fight again, and here he is, fighting in Atlanta, Georgia.”

Four months later, Ali’s comeback was temporarily derailed when he lost to Joe Frazier. It was a fight of truly historic proportions. Nobody in America was neutral that night. Ali avenged his loss to Frazier twice with victories in later bouts. Ultimately, he won the heavyweight championship of the world an unprecedented three times.

Meanwhile, Ali’s religious views were evolving. In the mid-1970s, he began studying the Qur’an more seriously, focusing on Orthodox Islam. His earlier adherence to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad—that white people are “devils” and there is no heaven or hell—was replaced by a spiritual embrace of all people and preparation for his own afterlife. In 1984, Ali spoke out publicly against the separatist doctrine of Nation of Islam representative Louis Farrakhan, declaring, “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.”

Ali today is a deeply religious man. Although his health is not what it once was, he is still one of the most recognizable and most loved people in the world. And with the passage of time, what he means to the world can be viewed from an ever-deepening perspective.

When Ali appeared on the scene, it was popular among those in the vanguard of the Civil Rights Movement to take the “safe” path. That path was unsafe for those who participated in the struggle. Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, Viola Liuzzo, and other courageous men and women were subjected to economic assaults, violence, and death when they carried the struggle “too far.” But the road they traveled was designed to be as nonthreatening as possible for white America. White

Americans were told, "All that black people want is what you want for yourselves. We're appealing to your conscience."

Then along came Ali, preaching not "white American values," but freedom and equality of a kind rarely seen anywhere in the world. And as if that wasn't threatening enough, Ali attacked the status quo from outside of politics and the accepted strategies of the Civil Rights Movement.

"I remember when Ali joined the Nation of Islam," Julian Bond recalled. "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."

"The nature of the controversy," said football great Jim Brown (also the founder of the Black Economic Union), "was that white folks could not stand free black folks. White America could not stand to think that a sports hero that it was allowing to make big dollars would embrace something like the Nation of Islam. But this young man had the courage to stand up like no one else and risk not only his life, but everything else that he had."

Ali downplayed his role. "I'm not no leader. I'm a little humble follower," he said in 1964. But for millions of people, the experience of being black changed because of Muhammad Ali. Listen to the voices of some black Americans who heard his call:

- Journalist and television commentator Bryant Gumbel: "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."
- Tennis legend and author Arthur Ashe: "Ali didn't just change the image that African Americans have of themselves. He opened the eyes of a lot of white people to the potential of African Americans; who we are and what we can be."
- Television reporter and interviewer Gil Noble: "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 talked about racism and slavery and all of that stuff. And everybody who was black, whether they said it overtly or covertly, said 'AMEN.'"

But Ali's appeal was extending far beyond black America. When he refused induction into the United States Army, he stood up to armies everywhere in support of the proposition that, "Unless you have a very good reason to kill, war is wrong."

Many Americans vehemently condemned Ali's stand. It came at a time when most people in the United States still supported the war. But as Julian Bond noted, "When Ali refused to take the symbolic step forward, everybody knew about it moments later. You could hear people talking about it on street corners. It was on everyone's lips."

"The government didn't need Ali to fight the war," Ramsey Clark, then the attorney general of the United States, recalled. "But they would have loved to put him in the service; get his picture in there; maybe give him a couple of stripes on his sleeve, and take him all over the world. Think of the power that would have had in Africa, Asia, and South America."

Instead, the government got a reaffirmation of Ali's earlier statement: "I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong." "And that rang serious alarm bells," sociologist Noam Chomsky later wrote, "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."

Ali's refusal to accept induction placed him once and for all in the vortex of the 1960s. "You had riots in the streets; you had assassinations; you had the war in Vietnam," journalist Dave Kindred

remembered. "It was a violent, turbulent, almost indecipherable time in America, and Ali was in all of those fires at once, in addition to being heavyweight champion of the world."

The title of world heavyweight champion was soon taken from Ali, but he never wavered from his cause. Speaking to a college audience, he proclaimed, "I would like to say to those of you who think I've lost so much, I have gained everything. I have peace of heart; I have a clear free conscience. And I'm proud. I wake up happy. I go to bed happy. And if I go to jail, I'll go to jail happy. Boys go to war and die for what they believe, so I don't see why the world is so shook up over me suffering for what I believe. What's so unusual about that?"

By the late 1960s, Ali had become a living embodiment of the proposition that principles matter. His power no longer resided in his fists. It came from his conscience.

Ali was far from perfect, and it would do him a disservice not to acknowledge his flaws. It's hard to imagine a person so powerful yet at times so naïve. On occasion, Ali acted irrationally. He cherished honor but too often excused dishonorable behavior in others. He accommodated dictators like Mobutu Sésé Seko of Zaire and Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, and his willingness to box in their countries stood in stark contrast to his love of freedom. There is nothing redeeming in one black person calling another black person a "gorilla," which was the label that Ali affixed to Joe Frazier. Nor should one gloss over Ali's past belief in racial separatism and the profligate womanizing of his younger days.

Yet the things that Ali has done right in his life far outweigh the mistakes of his past. And the rough edges of his early years have long since been forgiven or forgotten.

What remains is a legacy of monumental proportions and a living reminder of what people can be. Muhammad Ali's influence on an entire nation, black and white, and a whole world of nations has been incalculable.

It was inevitable that someone would come along and do what Jackie Robinson did. Robinson did it in a glorious way that personified his own dignity and courage. But if Jackie Robinson hadn't been there, someone else—Roy Campanella, Willie Mays, Henry Aaron—would have stepped in with his own brand of excitement and grace and opened baseball's doors.

With or without Jack Johnson, a black man would have won the heavyweight championship of the world eventually. And sooner or later, there would have been a black athlete who, like Joe Louis, was universally admired and loved.

But Ali carved out a place in history that was, and remains, uniquely his own. And it's unlikely that anyone other than Muhammad Ali could have created and fulfilled that role. Ali didn't just mirror his times. He wasn't a passive figure carried along by currents stronger than he was. He fought the current; he swam against the tide. He stood for something, stayed with it, and prevailed.

More than anyone else of his generation, Muhammad Ali belongs to the world. He encouraged millions of people to believe in themselves, raise their aspirations, and accomplish things that might not have been done without him. He wasn't just a standard-bearer for black Americans. He stood up for everyone.