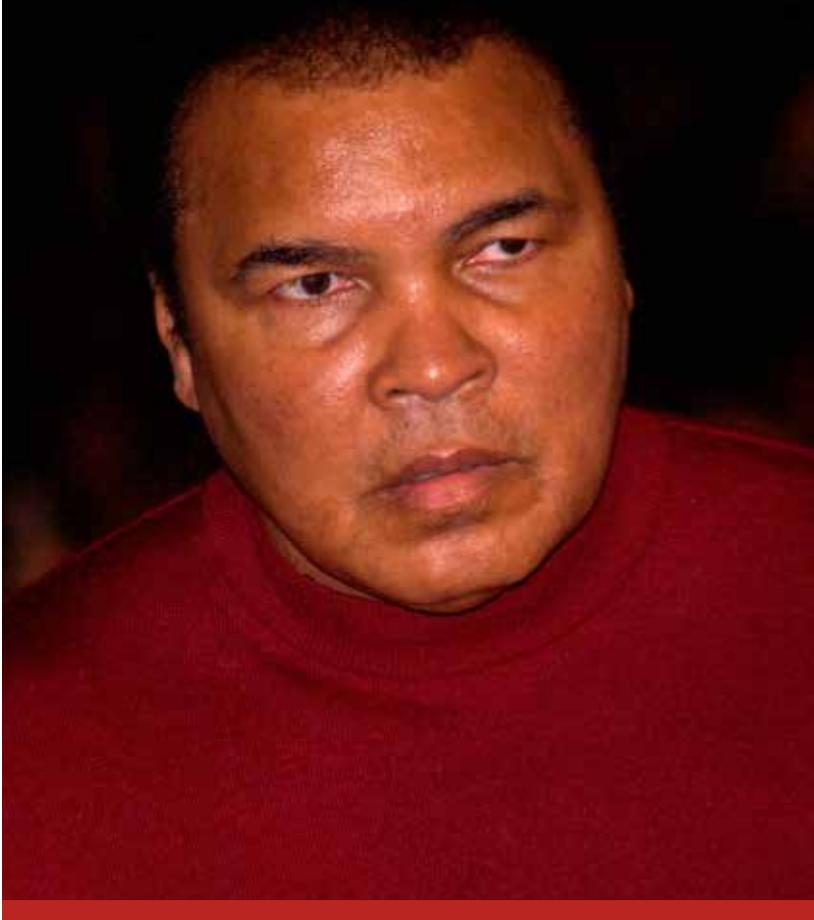


MUHAMMAD ALI

Requiem and Reflection 1942-2016



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By Francis A Kornegay

What follows is a very personal reflection on Muhammad Ali as a uniquely black experience from someone whose formative growing up in the 1960s America was, in many ways, influenced by Ali's audacious rise and by his trials and tribulations interlinked with black revolution and anti-Vietnam war resistance throughout a decade of turbulence. (This author actually learned how to box as an undergraduate in the University of Michigan's boxing club and turned down an opportunity to join the amateurs.) Seen from the vantage-point of the second decade of the 21st century, in different ways, Ali then and Barack Obama now are veritable symbols of perfection in how their personification of black America at its best has been a tribute to our cultural nation while impacting and transcending the broader American landscape.

Of course, as mortal human beings, neither was/is perfect as no one can be (about which more will be later said regarding Ali). Yet, there are times when unique individuals emerge on the scene as iconic expressions of a people's yearning for the kind of ego massage that uplifts the spirit and generates energising momentum for tackling challenges constantly confronting us. This applies especially to the predicament of Black America. In this vein, the emergence of Ali, first as an incredible boxing talent in a sport striking at the very heart of masculine identity and later as a cultural and political actor in his own right within and transcending the confines of the American racial battleground, deserves dissecting.

The boxing dimension comes first since, unless one understands how boxing relates to the macho basis of American identity, invested as it is in the projection of power, and the disempowering history of American black male emasculation, one cannot fully appreciate the meaning of Ali for African-Americans within the historical context of black boxing excellence, let alone Ali's broader meaning in the world at large.

The passing of Muhammad Ali, who bolted onto the boxing scene as the brash young Cassius Marcellus Clay in 1960 – The Louisville Lip –

effectively marks the end of almost a century of remarkable black boxing history, a veritable golden age over several decades ushered in by Ali lifting the heavyweight crown from the malevolent Charles 'Sonny' Liston in February 1964. Not since the first two decades of the 20th century has there been such an extraordinary concentration of black ringmen, including notable African standouts like Dick 'Tiger' Ihetu of Nigeria and Azuma Nelson of Ghana as well as John 'The Beast' Mugabi from Uganda (and don't forget the South African likes of Tap Tap Makatini hailing from KZN). This 'golden age' applies especially to the heavyweight division and the broader cultural, social and political significance that holding the heavyweight crown held in America's racially laden society.

One could, in fact, almost book-end that history. It would start with the first black heavyweight boxing champion, the 'Great Black Avenger' of Galveston, Texas, Jack Johnson (1908-1915) who inspired the aspirational 'Great White Hope' era. This was when he trapped Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia and lifted his crown on Boxing Day in 1908, setting up two years later his July 4th humbling of the great undefeated (that is, until he met Johnson!) James J Jefferies in the first 'Fight of the Century' in Reno, Nevada. It would end with the beginning of the reign of Cassius Clay turned Muhammad Ali in 1964, running through to Mike Tyson, Evander Holyfield and Britisher Lennox Lewis.

Ali, beginning with his charismatic pre-championship rise as Clay, symbolised the rise of a 'young, gifted and black' generation of black consciousness that blossomed out of the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s. The 'Brown Bomber,' Joe Louis, who in many ways was something of a successor of 'redemption' to Johnson's racially defiant exploits, would constitute the mid-way point in this saga. Louis symbolised, after all, a carefully black management groomed 'Good Negro' who kept his mouth shut and let his fist speak for him without upsetting the white American ego of his time. Louis was the anti-Johnson with Ali, via the '60s rise of African-American

cultural nationalism, ultimately signalling nationalism's 'thermidor' in his transition from the Nation of Islam, as a separatist sect, into the integrated domain of mainstream Islam.

On reflection, the Johnson-Louis-Ali trinity symbolises the intersection between America's racial history and its intimate intertwining with the history of boxing in America and the world over. Why this is so has to do with interlinked racism and the machismo of hyper-masculinity historically invested in the heavyweight boxing title. The heavyweight title was the metaphorical symbol of American power, manhood and supremacy interacting with the emasculation of that mythically threatening, over-sexed black male underpinning the subordination of an entire people. White supremacy has always been, at its heart, in its essence, about male supremacy while elevating the white woman onto a pedestal as the white man had his way with any woman of his desire anywhere and of whatever race or colour.

Metaphorically, America was a 'white man' and a 'white man' was America! American Power was White Power and vice versa. America and 'White America' were one and the same. The boxing ring was the crucible in which supremacy would be publically displayed in the starkest of terms, one on one, mano-a-mano which is why one South African boxing sage enthused once that 'boxing is the only real sport, everything else is a game'! (I second the motion!) As such, boxing would become the first battleground in the demythologising deconstruction of whiteness in all its masculine supremacy with Johnson (Lil'Arthur), Louis and Ali in the vanguard. Johnson overthrew this cultural regime in its darkest hour at the onset of the 20th century, triggering a riotously bloody backlash throughout the country with blacks being kept out of the heavyweight title competition until Louis' emergence.

The heavyweight boxing title had represented the penultimate in American masculinity as a white man's preserve until the insufferably arrogant Johnson came, laughing along to emerge as the greatest defensive boxer ever produced (the product of schooling

by an unsung legendary Polish fighter, Joe Choynski who KO's Johnson early in his career). In what was the nadir of race relations following the overthrow of post-civil war reconstruction ushering in what would become a century of post-slavery repression of African-Americans, Johnson humiliated his white opponents in the ring and whites generally out of the ring. He flaunted his mastery by invading the white man's female domain in pursuit of his women, rebelliously turned the table on white male impunity with black women.

Johnson ultimately paid dearly, convicted on a trumped up charge of 'white slavery' under the Mann Act and forced into several years of exile and imprisonment once he lost the title to Jess Willard in Havana, Cuba. Because of the trauma Johnson visited on white America amid the rise of the Ku-Klux-Klan, eviscerating the myth of white masculine superiority in and out of the ring, it would be several decades before another black heavyweight was allowed to ascend the throne. This came in the meteoric rise of Joe Louis Barrow whose family had migrated to Detroit from Alabama as part of that ongoing exodus from southern fried Jim Crow oppression. Louis became champion in 1937.

Joe projected the direct opposite of Johnson's assertiveness with a quiet humility befitting one of an untutored background who indulged the comfort zone of whites by talking with his fist rather than a mouth that could barely utter an intelligible word until much later in life (as when he was colour commentary in Ali's first title-winning fight with Sonny Liston). That is, until the Louisville Lip opened the garrulous mouth of the Cassius Clay; the Clay who became the Nation of Islam's Muhammed Ali and whose 'all-time' ring greatness was punctuated by an anti-Vietnam war black nationalism challenging the established decorum in rattling mainstream society during the turbulent 1960s and '70s. This was at the height of African-American racial assertion. But let us not get ahead of the story. For Louis, humble as he was, was an avenger like no other at a time and place marking the political crossroads of global power with pronounced racial overtones in that world war decade of

the thirties.

Ali's early race nationalism and anti-war martyrdom turned on its head the legend of Louis' muscles acknowledged by President Franklin Delanor Roosevelt. FDR is supposed to have told Joe Louis (on the lawn of the White House, not in it!) that the Brown Bomber had to deploy his muscles in the ring for democracy. This was as Joe was embarking on his squared circle 'race war' with German Max Schmeling in defending his title while avenging his traumatic upset loss to Schmeling in 1936 during Nazi ascendancy. Thus laden is the Johnson-Louis-Ali trinity with the racial and political dynamics of the times of their ringmanship. For Louis, who would win out? Muscles for democracy or for fascism?

Learning from his complacency and chinks discovered in his armour by Schmeling two years earlier, Louis went on to dismantle the German; it only took two minutes and four seconds, in the process breaking bones in his back and side in ten places, resulting in Schmeling's hospitalisation for ten weeks! Unlike the race riots following Johnson's humbling of Jeffries, Louis' victory produced celebrations throughout the country. But the race-related political symbolism in the Louis-Schmeling return match unfolded against a much broader social backdrop.

Boxing, throughout the 20th Century, was the premier sport reflection of just about every ethnic group's march up the American ladder of democracy and assimilation into mainstreaming acceptance. It is a history that has produced memorable ring wars across racial and ethnic divides and within them. Among African-Americans, it is a history that has constituted the three boxing 'golden ages' among blacks revolving around Johnson, Louis and Ali, extending into other weight divisions as among the welter and middleweights where reigned the unparalleled greatness of Sugar Ray Robinson (aka Walker Smith), Robinson still considered the greatest boxer, pound for pound, of all times and, along with Johnson, Ali's inspiration in shaping his boxing character in style and ring generalship. This then brings us to how Ali should be remembered within the squared

circle of the 'sweet science' apart from his charismatic social and political significance as a symbol of his times.

In many respects, Ali was a genuine freak of nature as a human specimen. If one had wanted to invent a cartoon character of a handsomely heroic avenger, they wouldn't have outdone Cassius Clay turned Muhammad Ali. Indeed, in this respect, the imagined American comic book hero, blond, blue-eyed 'Joe Palooka' readily comes to mind except that he never materialised in real life. Instead, it was his racial alter ego in the finely etched ebony of a heavyweight with the speed of a lightweight. In the words of Ali's legendary trainer, Angelo Dundee, the physical Ali represented the proportional perfection of the ideal heavyweight.

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Moreover, apart from the general assumption that 'pretty boys' lack toughness and are push-overs who fold under the first signs of pressure in the ring, Ali's good looks hid one of the physical secrets of his virtual unbeatability; this was the fact that his phenomenal hand and foot speed were augmented by one of the longest reaches in heavyweight boxing history with stamina to burn.

This unbeatable combination was totally lost in the hype over heavyweight champion Sonny Liston having, at 84 inches, the longest reach in heavyweight history in the build-up to their title fight in 1964. As such, as a devastating puncher, Liston was suppose to, as in the words of one sports writer, "squash Clay like an ant," not realising that this 'ant' had a wing span just two or

three inches shy of Liston's with faster than Ray Robinson and Floyd Patterson hand speed to match. Because of this singularly unique physical combination, it was almost impossible for anyone to lay a hand on Ali until three and a half years of forced exile from the ring robbed him of his dance-all-night foot speed and endurance. He was forced into having to come down off his toes and engage in exchanges that he easily avoided before being forced out of action.

Ali's forced exile from the ring came just short of his reaching his prime so that no-one will ever know just how great he might have become. Even then, upon his return to the ring, he still had enough left to retain much of his extraordinary capabilities as a fighter plus one who had a strong chin and could take punishment and keep on ticking! Ali goes down as one of the toughest heavyweight champions in the history of the division. The mistake Ali made in his comeback was going into his first clash with Joe Frazier without having enough warm-up fights under his belt. Indeed, had it not been for the 11th and 15th rounds of that memorable confrontation of exceptional undefeated black champions, Ali might well have narrowly won it on points or it could have easily ended in a draw or split decision.

That 'dream match,' in this assessment, goes down as one of Ali's best performances, losing though it was. On witness in this first of three wars were flashes of the blinding speed greatness he had become famous for. The head whipping he meted out to Frazier in the early rounds of that fight was an extraordinary display of sustained combination punching as he matched Joe flat-footed in ring-centre and along the ropes. Then came the 9th round of a come from behind shellacking he had been getting from Frazier that had Joe reeling in trouble from a doubling up on the left hook near the end of that round, arguably one of the most exciting rounds in the Ali-Frazier trilogy.

But there is a darker side to the Ali-Frazier rivalry that exposed a serious flaw in Muhammed's politicised public persona detracting from his otherwise iconic status. He subjected Frazier

to a brutalising 'blacker than thou' racial humour and political baiting in betrayal of the support Frazier had rendered him during his forced exile from the ring. No doubt, some of his haranguing of Frazier was intended to promote their ring encounters but went far over the line in projecting himself as the politically correct defender of black struggle and Frazier as an Uncle Tom. The bitterness of their ring wars was fuelled by this metaphorical intra-racial animosity that Ali injected into what, otherwise, should have been a rivalry free from such overtones of division among black people. More broadly, this bitterness, flowing as it did into the ring, was a sign of the times of tensions that had emerged among African-Americans to a level not seen during the times of Johnson and Louis.

Apart from this 'dark side' (or maybe because of it) the Ali-Frazier trilogy goes down as the rivalry to end all rivalries in heavyweight ring history, even eclipsing the legendary Ray Robinson-Jake 'Raging Bull' Lamotta wars. So then, how does Ali fare in the heavyweight title firmament of legendary greats including the likes of Johnson, Louis, Jack Dempsey and Rocky Marciano? Ali's combination of advantages in size, reach and speed of hand and foot would have likely overwhelmed these and other legendary greats, except perhaps for Johnson, whose defensive counterpunching brilliance might have nullified Ali's natural capabilities. The Galveston Giant was a good mover as well.

As punchers, Louis, Dempsey and Marciano had problems with speedy, shifty stick-and-move boxers who tended to be smaller than them or equal in size. Against Ali, they would have all been out-matched: effectively cruiserweights, ranging in weights from 190-200lbs, to a heavyweight whose weight gravitated between 210lbs (when he lifted the title from Liston) to 224lbs (against Frazier in the 'Thrilla in Manila'). Louis, while a good boxer and devastating combination puncher, was a plodder whose vulnerability to right hands would have rendered him a 'sitting duck' to a knock-out as early as the first round against the master of the right-hand lead.

Marciano had one of the best chins in the sport. Yet, prone to cut, he was

the smallest of this greatness generation and somewhat comparable to Joe Frazier but devoid of Frazier's size and non-stop speed of attacking pressure that made the post-exile Ali literally fight for his life. The 'Rock' never would have touched Muhammad and would have been stopped inside five to ten rounds. Both at their primes, the only heavyweight champion who could have fought Ali to a standstill would have been the one who sent him into long-overdue retirement, his former sparring partner, Larry Holmes. Holmes and Ali were almost size and stylistic carbon copies of one another with a slight edge Ali might have had in speed and mobility.

Because of the non-boxing and more politically related resonance of Ali, it is generally unappreciated how his comparative superiority over several generations of great heavyweights, combined with his charisma as a public figure forced into an activist leadership role by being exiled from the ring contributed to the celebrated icon he became. It turned out that Ali was the wrong black man to tamper with at a time when the federal government, under the Richard Nixon administration, was doing all in its considerable power to kill as many birds with one stone in dismantling black movement and anti-war activism. Already an icon amongst blacks and many whites, Ali's innate combativeness within the context of his outlier status as a member of the controversial Nation of Islam, was almost tailor-made for transforming him, during his three and a half years of forced exile from the ring, into a mobilising figure of martyrdom.

After all, this was at a time when black militancy had become ascendant in the black struggle repertoire of activism against racism, coming off the civil rights movement's transformation into a more nationalistic black power phase. This trend played into the agenda of the 'black Muslims' as the Nation tended to be popularly referred to and to their legendary disciplining role in black inner city communities through the kick-ass regimented deployment of the Fruits of Islam (FOI). Ali was a proud member of the FOI. Otherwise, the Nation, as a religio-nationalist sect,

shunned politics beyond the confines of the black community. Unlike his mentor, Malcolm X (whom Ali would later regret having abandoned), whose leadership role within the Nation propelled him beyond and into fatal opposition to its quietist isolationism from black activism, Ali as the Nation's new public face, did not go looking for the role he ultimately assumed. Ali was not the black intellectual political activist that became emblematic of Malcolm's tragically short-lived post-Nation identity – but he was naturally outspoken and in tune with the black militancy of the times.

Ali simply unwittingly and innocently ran afoul of the establishment when he uttered what many an African-American thought: 'I ain't got nothin' against them Viet-Cong, they never called me nigger!' For that, the establishment came down on him like a 'ton of bricks' and before long, the leadership likes of Martin Luther King, Jr who had also run afoul of the establishment for becoming vocal against America's Vietnam intervention, was publicly in his corner. Ali was propelled onto the university circuit fuelling the anti-war, anti-draft momentum.

Herein lay the roots of the 'Americanisation' of Ali: from black nationalist into his mainstream as a hero transcending race, eventually propelling him into a world ready to welcome an alternative expression of Americanness emanating out of the black experience. In the process, he became the first genuinely *world* champion through his legendary Kinshasa 'Rumble in the Jungle' with George Forman in Congo turned Zaire (an African first) and his brutal 'close to death' rubber match with smok'in Joe Frazier in Manila's Quezon stadium in the Philippines. These were but two of the most prominent venues where Ali plied his trade. As a white establishment-persecuted figure in and out of the ring before and after his ring exile, Ali's charismatic reign, not only as world heavyweight boxing champion, but as one of the greatest in the history of the sport, etched into international consciousness, the heroic identity he came to reflect and that would inspire the magnificent outpouring of tributes he received from all the world upon his passing. ■