# Who will follow the example of Muhammad Ali's principled stand in our day?

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The death of former heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, who, in his day, was a symbol of protest and resistance, has prompted the inevitable and instinctive effort by the establishment to appropriate his legacy for their own cynical uses.

It is hard to believe that more than half a century has passed since the first bout between Cassius Clay (Ali's birth name) and Sonny Liston in February 1964 and more than 40 years have come and gone since Ali's astonishing comeback.

Ali was a great athlete, but one could reasonably argue that he made his chief mark on history and popular consciousness by his courageous opposition to the Vietnam War. A product of rebellious times, Ali earned the admiration and respect of tens of millions around the globe for his act of protest.

After upsetting reigning heavyweight champion Liston in February 1964 at the age of 22, the boxer aligned himself with the black nationalist Nation of Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. He defended his title numerous times, before announcing in 1966 that he would not serve in the US military and then refusing induction into the armed forces a year later.

Ali explained at the time: "My conscience won't let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America. And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn't put no dogs on me, they didn't rob me of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father... Shoot them for what?... How can I shoot them poor people, Just take me to jail!"

Ali's boxing license was immediately suspended and his title stripped from him by the cowardly, "patriotic" boxing authorities. He was widely vilified by sports writers, generally among the stupidest and most superficial members of the journalistic fraternity. The venerable Red Smith claimed that the fighter had made himself "as sorry a spectacle as those unwashed punks who picket and demonstrate against the war." Another sports writer-sage, Jim Murray of the *Los Angeles Times*, termed Ali a "black Benedict Arnold."

Ali was convicted at a trial in June 1967 and sentenced to five years in prison. For four years, when he was at the height of his physical powers and his case was winding its way through the courts, Ali was unable to fight. The US Supreme Court finally tossed out his conviction in 1971. During his suspension he toured the country, speaking at hundreds of colleges and universities in opposition to the war in Vietnam and on other social issues. Ali would regain his boxing license and go on to take back his heavyweight title, lose it in the ring, and then win it back a record third time.

By all accounts, his noisy, self-promoting and occasionally cruel outbursts aside, Ali was a kind and decent man. In an often barbaric sport, he exhibited great gifts, remarkable grace and elegance, and enormous physical courage. Moreover, Ali had a devilishly sharp wit. He was not only impressive in the ring but could hold his own in the company of experienced interviewers and antagonists, and even best them.

Ali's decision to join the Nation of Islam does not speak to his perspicacity, but it has to be viewed in context: official American political life, only emerging from the depths of McCarthyite anticommunism, had nothing to offer. The most oppressed layers of the population were hunting around for some viable form of opposition.

There is no reason, of course, to idealize the boxer or make his ideas out to be more coherent or progressive than they were. Ali was all over the place ideologically, and by 2005 he was sufficiently domesticated or worn down by age and health issues to accept a Presidential Medal of Freedom from the arch-war criminal, George W. Bush.

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Nonetheless, in early 1966, when opposition to the Vietnam war was not yet a mass phenomenon in the US, Ali's stance was principled and inspiring. It certainly contributed to and encouraged public disaffection. By the time he refused induction on April 28, 1967, protest demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people had taken place in New York City and elsewhere, including one on April 15 of the same year (addressed by Martin Luther King, Jr.).

To root for Ali at the time was to root for opposition. He emerged as a public figure in an era when hostility to the status quo was a mass popular reality. In the US, Newark, Detroit, Los Angeles and other major cities went up in flames in the mid-1960s. The latter part of the decade witnessed the anti-Vietnam War movement and expressions of protest on every college campus. Big national strikes and battles between American workers and police on picket lines were on the order of the day. Internationally, hated dictatorships fell in Greece, Spain and Portugal. The global crisis reached its potentially revolutionary peak in the great French general strike, in which ten million people participated, in May-June 1968.

The dead, of course, cannot defend themselves against the exploitation of their lives and activities for utterly rotten purposes. Inevitably, President Barack Obama took the occasion of Ali's death to present an unsuspecting public with another example of his almost supernaturally sinister hypocrisy and cant.

In a statement, Obama asserted that Ali "stood up when it was hard; spoke out when others wouldn't. His fight outside the ring would cost him his title and his public standing. It would earn him enemies on the left and the right, make him reviled, and nearly send him to jail. But Ali stood his ground. And his victory helped us get used to the America we recognize today."

As though Obama, the ideal president for spies, policemen and investment bankers, would know anything about "standing up" and "speaking out" when there might be a price to pay. Has this individual ever taken a single step, twitched so much as a muscle, without ensuring himself well ahead of time that it would find approval with the powers that be?

It is a remarkable commentary on the putrid state of the media and public intellectual life in America that Obama can make such an astounding statement without anyone calling him to order. The US president praises Ali for being prepared to go to jail—this from the relentless, vindictive persecutor of Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden! Dead and buried opponents of imperialist war are so much less threatening!

"Muhammad Ali shook up the world. And the world is better for it," asserted Obama, the dispatcher of drone strikes that terrorize entire populations, the presider over "kill lists" that spell incineration for men, women and children in various parts of the globe.

One element of Obama's statement *did* ring true: his obvious astonishment at Ali's willingness to sacrifice career and income for principles. This speaks to a wider and genuinely disturbing problem: how is it possible that we are forced to look back *to the 1960s* for examples of political courage of this kind?

The United States has been at war with the rest of the world for a quarter-century. During that time, innumerable athletes, actors, musicians, artists, scientists and others have received honors at the hands of Bill Clinton, Bush and Obama, each president guilty of policies leading to the death of hundreds of thousands of human beings or more. Not a soul, as far as the public is aware, has turned down an award, spoken out at the White House or the Kennedy Center or generally repudiated honors from one of these blood-soaked administrations.

That list of honorees—some of whom have histories of social protest or at least independent thought—includes such figures as Sidney Poitier, Meryl Streep, Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, B.B. King, Stevie Wonder, James Taylor, Jack Nicholson, Paul Simon, Warren Beatty, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, Robert De Niro, Bruce Springsteen, Mel Brooks, Dustin Hoffman and Lily Tomlin.

Stagnant, opportunist times have encouraged submission and quiescence. In such periods of social indifference, as the Russian Marxist Plekhanov once noted, many souls fall into "a cold slumber" and "their moral level sinks very low." The sooner we fully emerge from such times the better!

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