

# The Politics of Boxing: Muhammad Ali and Ring Activism

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Global Research, June 13, 2016

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

*Boxing lends itself to political expression. There is the theatre, the anticipation, the blood of primeval sacrifice. Sometimes, even histrionics. Off the ring, dramas linger. Sometimes boxers enter political office. Philippine boxing celebrity Manny Pacquiao was informed last month that he would be sitting among 12 new members elected to the upper house of Congress. "I can focus and discipline myself, the way I did in boxing to help the nation."*[1]

The magisterially brash Muhammad Ali also gave us the boxer as political activist and figure. Some sports stars tend to assume that their pursuit is cocooned from politics, robed in protective measures against historical events.

Not Ali, whose basic assumption was that names of worth were also political weapons. After winning the Olympic light-heavyweight gold at Rome, the trash-talk man of noise and bustle came to the fore. In time, academics would get their pens working on titles for the man, coming up with such descriptions as the "postcolonial pugilist". Such designations are essentially meaningless. They ignore the other contributions, motivations and influences.

Budd Schulberg would consider in his *Loser and Still Champion* that Ali was a different breed of political sportsman, not so much a giant as a singular force of will. "It was not with Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Joe Frazier that Ali stood," assessed Schulberg, "but with Garvey, DuBois, and Jomo Kenyatta." Potent stuff, though this tendency resembles, all too closely, that of societies to misattribute grand political ambition to basic desires. (Australia has the horse thief and cop killing Ned Kelly of bush ranger fame to fill that role.)

Be present in brash focus, went the then Cassius Clay prior to his conversion, that shedding of his "slave name", who himself penned a poem of immodest persuasion "I Am the Greatest". "The fistic world was dull and weary/with a champ like Liston things had to be dreary."

Banishing any prospect of ever being dreary himself, the new Ali found spiritual food in Islam, a means of demarcating himself from the US order he wanted everyone to know he was boxing against. "I saw the liberation of black people from subjugation and slavery to freedom and equality and justice." In doing so, Ali became a willing figure of the Nation of Islam, and extolled its separatist code. He was convinced, at least in his showmanship, that rapprochement between the races would be difficult. Stick to your racial pool. Focus on your people and defend your women.

His statements about Vietnam and rejecting the draft call remain defiantly poignant, though they do have a sense of being scripted. That said, they speak to a US empire that should have kept its blotting paper clean instead of bloodying it with nonsensical foreign

engagements. “No Viet Cong ever called me nigger,” he explained with unmistakable simplicity. No participation was warranted in such a conflict, a refusal to partake in a nasty foreign conflict at the dictates of masters. White masters, of course, gave it sharper effect:

“No I am not going ten thousand miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over. This is the day when such evils must come to an end. I have been warned that to take such a stand would put my prestige in jeopardy and could cause me to lose millions of dollars which should accrue to me as a champion.”

For that act of political stubbornness as conscientious objector, he was stripped of his titles and his New York State boxing license. In June 1967, the jury pondered his refusal to submit to the induction notice for a mere 20 minutes. Ali became a martyr, not to boxing, where he was champion, but to the course of history, a far less controllable prospect. It would take the US Supreme Court in 1971 to reverse the decision of the local draft board which failed to verify why his application for conscientious objector status had been refused.[2] His beliefs, the 8-0 decision noted, “are founded on the tenets of the Muslim religion as he understands them.”

Politics, however, cuts ways. Sportspeople can become instruments for causes beyond their understanding. As nobly dramatic as the individual cause can seem, figures can become convenient jesters or court fools, dragged down into murky depths and unfortunate plays of power.

Sterling black personalities can also become the pawns of political experiment, be it through conscious manipulation or subtle backing. The latter happened to the unfortunate Ernie Terrell, who paid dearly for insisting on calling Ali Cassius Clay in the ring and had been deemed by Ali fans the “white man’s nigger”. Fans and punters took to the barricades based on race and establishment.

Joe Frazier also became the victim of political circumstance, backed by the anti-Ali entourage because he so happened to be fighting him. Ali capitalised. With the blessing of the Nation of Islam, Frazier bore the brunt of perverse racial motifs, becoming the “Gorilla in Manila”. He was the convenient “Uncle Tom”.

Since the beginning of time, imperial powers have used physical, gladiatorial combat as spectacle, and distraction. Athletes sweating and bleeding before skilfully directed blows provided the twentieth century’s version of the Imperial Colosseum. The Rumble in the Jungle in October 1974 was as much a political triumph for its main backer, Zaire’s ruthless Mobutu Sese Seko, as it was for a triumphant Ali.

Manager Don King, short of cash, was happy to accept money from a regime that had been installed with the good graces of Western intelligence services. Neither Ali, nor fellow pugilist George Foreman, spent much time thinking that their host was the West’s grand Cold War darling and serial looter of his people.

The murdered Patrice Lumumba, removed under directions from Brussels, London and Washington, was barely acknowledged. Instead, the world got live broadcasts, closed circuit television, and ample drama. The puppets duly performed.

The same theme was followed by the Thrilla in Manila in 1975. The Marcos dictatorship needed justifications and props to show that military rule against communists cut the mustard. Just as Hitler found value in an Olympics, hoping he could advertise Teutonic genius and Third Reich virtue, Mobutu and Marcos found ample grounds to keep the mind of the populace on the good things. Boxing has proven ever so useful in this enterprise, though it has rarely had the dramatic, skilful array that the 1970s supplied.

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Notes:

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-19/philippine-boxing-star-pacquiao-wins-seat-in-senate/7430426>

[2] <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/403/698>

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