

**1966: Muhammad Ali – “Ain’t no Viet Cong ever called me nigger.”**

*From the mid-1960's through to the 1980's, Muhammad Ali – the World Heavyweight Boxing Champion - was the most well-known face on the entire planet. As well as being the most awesome athlete in the world, he was incredibly intelligent, politically aware and eloquent, and a champion of Black Rights in general and those of Muslims in particular.*



By early 1966, the US was finding it difficult to impose its will on the Vietnamese and the draft call was expanded; the Heavyweight champion of the world, Muhammad Ali (right, with Malcolm X) was reclassified as 1A, eligible for military service. Ali was told the news at a training camp in Miami came out with one of his famous poems:

*Keep asking me, no matter how long,  
On the war in Vietnam, I'll still sing this song:  
I ain't got no quarrel with no Viet Cong.*

At the time the critics asked: "What does Muhammad Ali know about Vietnam? He's being misled by black militants". But on the day he made his "no quarrel" remark he also amplified his feelings to a New York Times reporter: "Boxing is nothing, just satisfying to some bloodthirsty people. I am no longer Cassius Clay, a Negro from Kentucky. I belong to the world, the black world. I will always have a home in Pakistan, in Algeria, in Ethiopia. This is more than money."

Here we see how Ali's redefinition of his personal identity had led to a political conclusion, and a confrontation with the state. The ordinary loyal American was expected to take on the enemies of the American government as his own personal enemies. Ali was moved by a different loyalty - a loyalty to a global constituency of colour whose interests were at odds with those of the US establishment.

When Ali declared his alienation from the war in Vietnam, in early 1966, not one mainstream politician or newspaper of any kind had come out against the war. That month, February 1966, the Number One record was the truly execrable song called "The Ballad of the Green Berets", celebrating the special forces units who were at that moment running a systematic campaign of torture against the Vietnamese people.

The response of the American establishment - both black and white - to Ali's impudence was virulent. There has probably never been a sports figure anywhere as thoroughly reviled as Muhammad Ali was in his homeland in 1966. He was routinely dubbed a traitor and a coward. It very rapidly became impossible for him to fight in America. The American establishment, in its infinite stupidity, chased Muhammad Ali out of the country - but in the end this only helped strengthen and enlarge his global audience.

Muhammad Ali, for years to come, was the best known American individual opposed to the Vietnam war. Far more than more political figures - he had the greater recognition. When Ali returned to America in early 1967 he faced a daunting choice - give in, sign up with the army and cut a deal with them (it was always made plain to him that he would not have to fight), or, go to jail, loose his Heavyweight crown and never fight again. But his conscience would not let him back down.

Ali was stripped of his title, charged, convicted, sentenced to five years in prison, released on bail. His passport was taken away from him and for three and a half years he was not allowed to leave the United States and not allowed to fight at all. In 1967 no sane person would have predicted that Ali would ever fight again, no less reclaim the Heavyweight title, no less become universally adored as the most popular sporting figure of the twentieth century. And the reason is that no one predicted that the anti-war movement would grow to mass proportions.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court eventually exonerated him, he lost three prime fighting years. Still, Ali came back and reigned victorious. But the victory was greater outside the ring than it ever was inside.

### **Will Smith, speaking about the Film "Ali", 18/1/02**

What Muhammad Ali did was find the simplicity in life. He said: "I'm going to live by the word of my God to the best of my ability and my God tells me I should not be killing people in Vietnam." He established his priorities. We look at him and say, "Wow! He's so deep and complex." What he's about is actually real simple: if you believe something is wrong, don't do it. No matter what somebody promises you, no matter how somebody threatens you, no matter what the repercussions are.

Ali's life gives such a wonderful picture of what you can be. He showed that who you are is not about what's around you. It's about who you decide to be, and do you have what it takes to be that person? Are you willing to sacrifice, to work and to fight? His life illustrates the joy and pain of being who you want to be, committing to your God and living the way you want to live - spiritually, emotionally, physically, sexually - and how liberating that can be."

#### **Questions:**

1. Why did Muhammad Ali oppose the Vietnam war?
2. Why did his stance attract so much attention?
3. How far did he suffer as a result of this stance?
4. Why was his stance so important in historical terms?