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Media's Changing Perspective on Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight

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Abstract
Muhammad Ali is best known as being a fighter who transcended the sport of boxing during his time in the ring, yet a pivotal moment in his life occurred outside the ring with his protest of the Vietnam War draft. Newspapers during the era of Vietnam were the primary form of media consumption and they possessed the power to influence how the American people perceived the events that surrounded the Vietnam War such as Muhammad Ali's draft protest. *The New York Times* is one such newspaper that provided extensive coverage of Muhammad Ali and his draft protest allowing for an analysis of how media can play a role in shaping public opinion towards Muhammad Ali and the Vietnam War as a whole.

Media's Changing Perspective on Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight

Muhammad Ali, previously known as Cassius Clay, returned to the boxing ring in 1970 with a fight against Jerry Quarry. Ali's return was highly anticipated after his multi-year hiatus from the sport because of his protest of the Vietnam War draft. In his autobiography, *The Greatest: My Own Story,* Ali discusses his relationship with journalists prior to his fight with Quarry:

> "In fact, I detect a feeling of friendliness, here and there, even for some whose columns have hurt me most. From now on, most of them will stop trying to punish me for refusing to fight in Viet Nam or berate me because of my religion, though they will never treat me the way they would if I became a black Catholic or a black Christian Scientist. (…) But I have missed them, and they seemed to have missed me. I even missed the blow-to-blow word fights I was used to, especially with those who kept me under almost constant attack: Gene Ward and Dick Young of the New York *Daily News,* Jim Bishop, Jimmy Cannon, and Arch Ward of the Chicago *Tribune*, all of whom are now paying little attention to Jerry Quarry, but concentrating on me."[1]

What does Ali mean by the "blow-to-blow fights" that he had with these journalists?

Ali's fighting was not limited to the boxing ring, as fighting and struggle in all of its

[1] Muhammad Ali, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (New York: Random House, 1975), 289.

forms were central to who Muhammad Ali was. During Ali's time in the spotlight, journalists like those who Ali mentions attempted to create controversy around him as he strived to stay true to himself. Ali fought against these journalists and others for his representation, freedom, and ability to have his true self projected into the minds of the American public.

Muhammad Ali's boxing career was always a hot topic for the media because it was how many knew of the name Muhammad Ali. Ali was a controversial figure both within and outside the ring because his brash persona did not fit well with the image of an athlete held by many sportswriters of the time. Because of his personality and his conversion to Islam, many writers discredited Ali's athletic achievements and wanted him to lose his fights. One fight in particular, Floyd Patterson vs Ali in 1965, highlights the animosity that many in the public had towards Muhammad Ali. Ali was the reigning heavyweight champion; however, much of the public disliked the notion of a Muslim being the champion of an American sport. Because of these feelings, Patterson saw himself as the Christian savior of boxing coming to rid the sport of Muhammad Ali and his Muslim beliefs. Much of the public jumped on this idea because of Patterson's role as a charismatic black man that was coming to defeat a more outspoken black individual who tried to disrupt the status quo of society. Patterson recalls a moment before the fight that he had with Frank Sinatra, "he told me I could win, how many people in America were counting on me to win back the championship from Clay."[2] Frank Sinatra represented the opinion of many Americans in thinking that Patterson needed to defeat Ali to save the sport of boxing because Ali did not embody their image of the ideal champion. In addition, it is telling

[2] David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (New York: Random House, 1998), 281.

that Sinatra uses the name Clay instead of Ali, which was common because the public, including the newspapers, continuously referred to Ali by his birth name, Cassius Clay. After his conversion to Islam, Ali changed his name from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali because "Cassius Clay is a slave name," he said. "I didn't choose it and I don't want it. I am Muhammad Ali, a free name."[3] Despite this declaration by Ali, the majority of Americans refused to accept the new name of Muhammad Ali. During his career, Ali not only had to battle in the ring, but also with the media and the image of him that they portrayed. Within newsprint media, writers created an idea of a person that was controversial and did not fit into the ideals of American society. Through their writings, journalists wanted to ensure that the personality that Ali was creating for himself was cast aside and forgotten. They did not desire a black man who was willing to use his voice to bring attention to political issues; instead, they wanted to suppress it and did so by creating a certain figure that would maintain controversy in the eyes of the people. To present their desired image of Ali to the public, writers rejected Ali's chosen name and insisted on using Cassius Clay. The individual who Ali himself embodied thus was not presented by the media.

Muhammad Ali is best known as a fighter who dominated the boxing stage and is often considered one of the greatest athletes of all time. Ali's fight, however, was not restricted to the boxing ring. Ali was constantly fighting for his character as more than just an athlete to be brought to the forefront of the public's minds. Ali wanted to be remembered for multiple things – someone who fought for the freedom of others, a person who leaned on the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, and finally as a heavyweight

[3] Arica Coleman, "What's in a Name: Meet the Original Cassius Clay," *Time,* June 10, 2016, https://time.com/4363225/original-cassius-clay-muhammad-ali.

champion. Ali's sense of self was multidimensional, and he fought for all of these facets of his life to be incorporated into his public memory. For his book *King of the World*, author David Remnick talked with Ali at Ali's home in Michigan and, "while we were still watching the tapes of the Liston and Patterson fights, I asked Ali how he'd like to be remembered."[4] Ali answered:

> I'll tell you how I'd like to be remembered: as a black man who won the heavyweight title and who was humorous and who treated everyone right. As a man who never looked down on those who looked up to him and who helped as many of his people as he could- financial and also in their fight for freedom, justice, and equality. As a man who wouldn't embarrass them. As a man who tried to unite his people through the faith of Islam that he found when he listened to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. And if all that's asking too much, then I guess I'd settle for being remembered only as a great boxing champion who became a preacher and a champion of his people. And I wouldn't even mind if folks forgot how pretty I was."[5]

The public remembers famous individuals who are continuously in the spotlight, such as athletes, by how these individuals and the media create a public image. Muhammad Ali is one such figure as the memory that people have of Ali was created by how the public viewed him. Through his public appearances, Ali actively influenced his own persona and image of how he would be remembered. Looking at a newspaper such as *The New York Times* grants the opportunity to show how the media attempts to construct the personality of an individual, thus influencing how the public formulates opinions about an individual such as Muhammad Ali.

Muhammad Ali was born with the given name Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr., on January 17, 1942, in Louisville, Kentucky, and began boxing at the age of 12.[6] Over the course of his life, Ali fought many battles; Ali fought for the heavyweight title, fought for

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[4] Remnick, 305.
[5] Remnick, 306.
[6] Thomas Hauser, "Muhammad Ali," *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad-Ali-boxer.

the ability to practice his religion without being denigrated, and fought against white oppression of his race. Multiple writers and members of the public sought to categorize Muhammad Ali by a solitary facet of identity be it religion, race, or sport; however, this could never be possible because of how uncategorizable Ali was. Ali's own words prove how he wanted to be remembered as someone who was complex and unafraid of occupying multiple spaces to help better others and himself. He was not just a boxer, but also a person who was religious and fought for others. He wanted to show the world "a new kind of black man."[7] After winning the gold medal in boxing during the 1960 Olympics, Cassius Clay gained prominent attention from the American public. Clay's popularity within the sport of boxing would only grow after he defeated Sonny Lipton in 1964 to win the US boxing heavyweight title. Two days later Clay announced that he had accepted the teachings of the Nation of Islam, and several days later, he took the name Muhammad Ali, as given to him by Elijah Muhammad, his spiritual mentor. Over the next three years, Ali dominated the sport.[8] One of the most pivotal fights of Muhammad Ali's life, however, did not occur within the confines of a boxing ring, but occurred in 1967 when Muhammad Ali protested the Vietnam War draft. Ali's fight against the draft destroyed much of the goodwill that many Americans had towards Ali.

When his name was called to be inducted into the armed forces and fight in Vietnam, Ali refused to step forward. This decision brought forth a collision between Ali's race, religion, and athletic abilities. Vietnam had seen its country divided into North Vietnam and South Vietnam, with the Soviet Union backing the North and the United

[7] David Remnick, "American Hunger," *The New Yorker,* https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/10/12/american-hunger.
[8] Hauser, "Muhammad Ali".

States supporting the South. During the late 1960s, the United States was increasing its role in Vietnam and more American men were sent overseas to fight the communist Viet Cong. The increasing need for eligible men to fight saw the number of people drafted into the war increase exponentially. One person affected by the draft was Muhammad Ali. Initially Ali, was classified as 1-Y, ineligible to be drafted because of a low score on the mental acuity test; however, in 1966, the military lowered its draft eligibility standards and Ali was reclassified as 1-A, making him draft eligible. Ali registered as a Conscientious Objector, but that status was denied. In 1967, Muhammad Ali stood in front of the Armed Forces and Examining Station in Houston; when his name was called to enlist into the United States Army, Ali refused to step forward.[9] By standing still, Muhammad Ali made a monumental decision that produced shockwaves throughout the American nation; he was a prominent figure who refused to do what many saw as a duty for their country and join the fight in Vietnam. After a two-day trial, Ali was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison and a $10,000 fine — the maximum penalty.

Ali's decision to protest came from his claim of conscientious objection due to his affiliation with the Nation of Islam. Muhammad Ali first announced his conversion to Islam after his title winning fight against Sonny Lipton in 1964. One person who was instrumental to Ali's conversion was Malcolm X. Ali heard Malcolm X speak in Detroit and was in awe of Malcolm's ability to capture a room. "My first impression of Malcolm X was how could a black man talk about the government and white people and act so bold and not be shot at? How could he say

[9] Robert Lipsyte. "Clay Refuses Army Oath: Stripped of Boxing Crown: Induction Oath Refused by Clay," *The New York Times*, April 29, 1967, https://search-proquest-com.proxy.swarthmore.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/117736674/C9041EA7D9E24807PQ/1?accountid=14194.

these things? (…) He was fearless. That really attracted me."[10] Muhammad Ali used Malcolm X as a role model in shaping his identity. Ali learned about Islam and black power from Malcolm and "in the year and a half before Cassius won the heavyweight crown, Malcolm consciously molded him into Muhammad Ali. Cassius adopted Malcolm's rhetoric, mimicked his delivery, and copied his cool, regal pose. He became, as a few journalists dimly sensed, a clone of his mentor.[11] Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali formed a strong relationship that had a massive influence on the construction of the identity of Muhammad Ali as a person. The language that Ali used throughout the course of his life had roots from what he heard from his friend, Malcolm X. Muhammad Ali learned about the Nation of Islam through Malcolm X and his subsequent protests against white power are drawn from the teachings of the Nation and Malcolm X.

After Muhammad Ali was reclassified to become draft eligible, reporters immediately rushed to his house to learn the reaction from the heavyweight champion. Ali did not disappoint the media as he controversially told them, "Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them VietCong."[12] From this point forward, the image of Muhammad Ali within the minds of the public changed. Many Americans already felt a distrust towards Ali's religion, but Ali claiming that he did not have to fight the war because of his religion drove the animosity that many had towards the Nation of Islam and towards Ali. Ali recognized the magnitude of his decision and how the public viewpoint of him had changed as a result of his stand, writing in his autobiography, "I know my image with the American public is completely ruined because of the stand I take. If I could do otherwise I wouldn't even jeopardize my life by walking in the streets of American,

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[11] Randy Roberts and John Matthew Smith, *Blood Brothers : the Fatal Friendship Between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X* New York (Basic Books A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2016), 311.
[12] Bob Orkland, "I Ain't Got No Quarrel With Them Vietcong," *The New York Times,* June 27, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/27/opinion/muhammad-ali-vietnam-war.html.

especially in the South with no bodyguard. I do it only because I mean it. I will not participate in this war."[13] Ali is cognizant of the effects that will result from his refusal to participate in the war; however, he knows that he must stay true to who he is. After Ali refused to step forward, he said, "I have searched my conscience and I find I cannot be true to my belief in my religion by accepting such a call."[14] Americans blamed Islam for Ali's choice to not answer the call that many saw as a necessary duty to the American nation. Due to his decision to refuse the draft, Ali was stripped of his heavyweight title and no longer allowed to fight within the United States. Though unable to fight in the ring, Ali entered the fight of his life, as he fought his conviction and sentencing for draft evasion. In 1971, Muhammad Ali's case reached the Supreme Court and the Court ruled in his favor, unanimously overturning his conviction for refusing the draft.

Within this period of time from Ali not stepping forward when his name was called to the Supreme Court ruling in his favor to overturn his conviction, many publications devoted a great deal of space to the figure of Muhammad Ali. As a source, newspapers provide a snapshot of how the public views a certain event as it occurs and the people involved. Newspapers project what the population is thinking and feeling, but also may influence how a reader perceives a reported event and individuals. One such newspaper was *The New York Times,* which followed the story of Muhammad from when he first decided to protest the draft to his win in the Supreme Court. The media's following of Ali's public rejection of the Vietnam War increased the public's perception of Ali as well as heightening the conflict between those for and against America's involvement in the War. As a black male who had converted to Islam, Ali's stance

[13] Ali, *The Greatest,* 181.
[14] Lipsyte, "Clay Refuses Army Oath".

brought to the forefront issues of not only politics but also race and religion. The question that arises is how did a newspaper like *The New York Times* go about creating a figure like Muhammad Ali who was vocal and unafraid of speaking his mind, but disliked by many for these attributes? *The New York Times* portrayal of Muhammad Ali is thus a window into cultural perception of race, religion, and war.

One theme in the papers published by *The New York Times* in 1967 was that Ali's protest was about making a political statement. The writers found that Ali was not being the "ideal" heavyweight champion because of his engagement in the politics of the time. Writers throughout the 1960s were continuously trying to place Muhammad Ali within a box. People wanted to classify him only as a successful boxer who at times could be a little full of himself, as he earned himself the nickname "The Louisville Lip." In a March 1967 publication of *The New York Times,* Russell Baker wrote, "We like our champions humble. (…) Ali outrages us by coming to the microphone and calling a bum a bum."[15] As Baker shows, the public wanted a champion that did not go against the status quo. This, however, was not who Ali was; he was never afraid to use his voice and speak up for his beliefs.

The belief of many is that athletics and politics should never associate with one another. These individuals argue that athletes should not use their public platform to engage with the politics of the time; instead, they should occupy only one sphere and focus only on their sport. Muhammad Ali's protest broke this belief as he was one of the first athletes to use his voice to cross into the sphere of politics. Ali was breaking the mold of the quiet athlete in deciding to

[15] Russell Baker, "Observer: Powell and Ali Break the Faith," *The New York Times*, March 4, 1967, https://search-proquest-com.proxy.swarthmore.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/117576666/F95FDB1567FB4D63PQ/7?accountid=14194.

stand against the Vietnam draft. The sports world did not react well to this new persona of an athlete, as the New York Athletic State Commission and World Boxing Association acted quickly in stripping Ali of his heavyweight title. As *The New York Times* reported:

> Only a few hours after he had refused to be inducted yesterday into the armed forces of the United States, Cassius Clay was stripped of his world heavyweight boxing championship by the major governing authorities of the sport in this country and Europe.[16]

The decision by both the State and the World Boxing Association shows how many thought that Ali was not fitting into this image of the ideal boxer, and how his stance in the political world had consequences in the athletic world. By not engaging in his "American duty," Ali faced severe repercussions in his sport for his actions, losing his title and being placed into exile from the sport. *The New York Times* quotes Edwin Dooley, the chairman of the New York State Athletic Commission, as stating that "his refusal to enter the service is regarded by the commission to be detrimental to the best interests of boxing." It is interesting to note how Ali's decision to protest the draft was viewed as something with repercussions for the sport of boxing. For this boxing association, it was important to dissociate themselves from an individual like Ali who was using his voice to speak out against America's actions in the Vietnam War. The Commission did not want to associate the sport of boxing with an individual who was engaging in actions that were highly controversial and considered "un-American." In order to maintain popularity with the American public, the Commission disassociated themselves from Muhammad Ali. Because Ali was not sticking to his realm of boxing, in

[16] Thomas Rogers, "New York Lifts Crown in Swift Move." *The New York Times*, April 29, 1967, https://search-proquest-com.proxy.swarthmore.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/117677521/E0FDAB69D5E144D9PQ/14?accountid=14194.

the minds of the Commission swift punishment was necessary to save the sport of boxing.

Ali's draft protest, however, was not the first time that Muhammad Ali had strayed from the realm of sports into activism. The struggle to characterize who Ali was and how to portray him in the media began in 1964 because of his conversion to Islam. Ali's relationship to the Nation of Islam brought forth a facet of Ali's character that the public did not want to accept. The dislike and fear that people had for the Nation of Islam drove many to form negative opinions of Muhammad Ali, and this negative image of him was what the media presented. After Ali's conversion to the Nation, the boxing sportswriter Jimmy Cannon commented on the implications of Ali's choice in religion in relation to the boxing industry:

> The fight racket since its rotten beginnings, has been the red-light district of sports. But this is the first time it has been turned into an instrument of hate, it has maimed the bodies of numerous men and ruined their minds but now, as one of Elijah Muhammad's missionaries, Clay is using it as a weapon of wickedness in an attack on the spirit.[17]

Cannon was not alone in expressing his disappointment that Ali was using his voice rather than simply sticking to his role as an athlete. The American public wanted athletes to stay out of politics because it was not the athlete's role in society. The athlete is supposed to provide entertainment for the public not to give voice to the politics of the time. Martin Luther King even commented on Ali's conversion, "when Cassius Clay joined the Black Muslims and started calling himself Cassius X he became a champion of racial segregation (…) I think perhaps Cassius should spend more time proving his boxing skill and do less talking."[18] As the words of Cannon and King show, many in the

[17] Remnick, 210.
[18] Remnick, 211.

public disliked the fact that Ali was associating himself with the Nation and this influenced how he was presented by the media.

In today's culture, multiple black athletes are following Ali's example and using their voices to inspire change. Muhammad Ali was one of, if not the first, black athletes to engage in politics with his draft protest of the Vietnam War. In current times, more scholarship focuses on the role of the voice of the black athlete and in this scholarship each writer begins with Ali's draft protest. This is because Ali paved the way for other black athletes to use their notoriety and protest to support their political beliefs. Writers create an image of Muhammad Ali that focuses on a powerful, once in a lifetime individual who was loved by many and unafraid to speak his truth.

Another important facet in regard to scholarship on Muhammad Ali is the collision of race and religion during the 1960s and 1970s. During this time period, the Nation of Islam was placed under increased scrutiny from both the public and the American government. In addition, anti-black and anti-Islam sentiment were connected. Professor and author Khaled Beydoun writes, "Islamophobia and anti-black racism were not unfolding on separate tracks, or inflicted on distinct populations; they were, and are, entwined by a kindred source and common targets."[19] Beydoun's scholarship highlights how portions of the population see the perceived radicalism of Islam coupled with an outspoken black individual and how this leads to hostile public opinions. Professor Junaid Rana adds, "in the American context of racial formation, Islam represented a liberatory racial identification for African Americans. This translated into a threat to white Christian supremacy that was then used to further racialize immigrant Islam."[20] As a Black

[19] Khaled A. Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (California: University of California Press, 2018), 153.
[20] Junaid Rana, "The Story of Islamophobia" *Souls*, (2007): 148-161, DOI:

Muslim Ali represented the "threat to white Christian supremacy" which drove fear of both Ali and his religion into the white American state. In their book, Roberts and Smith capture this fear of the Black Muslim, "the commotion was all about the country's fears- fears of a religion most Americans knew little about; fears that the Muslims were a black menace lurking in the shadows; fears that Elijah Muhammad intended to lead a black menace."[21] Many scholars highlight this connection that existed between anti-Muslim and anti-black feelings. They focus on the fear felt by portions of the population, and how these public fears reflected the public's perception of the character of Muhammad Ali.

One of the most important components of the history of the Vietnam War was the anti-war movement that occurred amongst the American people on the home front. Significant scholarship exists regarding the anti-war movement and the effect that it had on America's involvement in Vietnam. Muhammad Ali fits seamlessly into this scholarship as he was arguably the most well-known draft protester during this era. When it comes to remembering Ali as a person, non-historian writings mention Ali's protests, yet Ali is hardly mentioned in the scholarship of historians. For example, the section on the anti-war movement on the website History.com, includes only one mention of Muhammad Ali. "Did you know? Boxer Muhammad Ali was one prominent American who resisted being drafted into service during the Vietnam War. Ali, then heavyweight champion of the world, declared himself a 'conscientious objector.'"[22] Although not necessarily a "historian" the History.com page shows how Ali's involvement is really more of a "fun fact" rather than an important historical part of the anti-war

10.1080/10999940701382607.

[21] Roberts and Smith, 208.

[22] "Vietnam War Protests," accessed October 25, 2020, https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-protests.

movement. Historians place much more emphasis on other aspects of the anti-war movement, such as protests done by students, than the influence of Ali's protest on this movement.

In his book *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance during the Vietnam War*, Michael Foley explores draft resistance and how it became central to American politics, yet Ali is only mentioned on a total of four pages. Foley argues how draft resistors were the leaders of the anti-war movement. It is curious that in a book focusing on the importance of the draft resistance someone as famous and active in the movement as Ali, who garnered large amounts of public attention at the time for the cause, is hardly mentioned. When Foley does talk about Ali's case, it is more background information rather than an analytical approach of Ali's importance to the draft resistance movement and the influence his actions had. This is far different from the approach that readers see when looking at works done by non-historians, i.e., sports writers and other media journalists. When it comes to the anti-war movement, non- historians place Ali into the forefront of conversations surrounding protests done by black athletes as opposed to the historian Foley, who gives him only a casual mention. Simon Hall's book continues this theme. Hall explores the intersection between the Civil Rights movement and the anti-war movement in the 1960s. Muhammad Ali, a black athlete, would seem to fit into this intersection perfectly, yet he is only mentioned a handful of times. This difference in how Ali is presented in scholarship influences how readers today think about Muhammad Ali and his role in history. As a result of the disparate stories told, contemporary followers understand and appreciate the significant role and influence of Ali in the anti-war movement, while those reading only historical works do not.

After Muhammad Ali took his stand to protest the draft, Ali immediately became front page news for *The New York Times* with titles such as "Clay Refuses Army Oath" and "Clay Guilty in Draft Case." Muhammad Ali was already considered a controversial

figure because of his affiliation with the Nation of Islam, and his draft protest only added to the distrust of his character. Although views on the Vietnam War were extremely polarized, the notion of refusing to be drafted was unthinkable for the American public. If someone's name was called, as Ali's was, public opinion was generally that he must step forward and do his duty for the American people and the nation. David Flores explores how memory can shape the political narrative of events. In his article, the author specifically examines twenty-four Vietnam veterans and how their memories of the war shaped their political attitudes towards the war. Flores writes, "to these veterans, participating in the Vietnam War was 'just something that you had to do' as a young man. They felt that the World War II generation of men fought for their country and now it was their turn 'to do their part.'"[23] In including this opinion of veterans, Flores establishes how young American men were influenced by the older generation; these young men embraced the fact that they would have to go and sacrifice their lives in Vietnam, as "just something you had to do." This perception of the war as a generational concept of doing one's part for the greater good is crucial to understanding how the negative image of Ali as someone who refused do his part was created. In looking at how Muhammad Ali is portrayed in *The New York Times* during 1967, one can see how difficult it was to categorize Ali. Ali was making the conscious decision to not play his part and because of that, *The Times* created an image of him for the public that differed from how Ali saw himself and his protest.

[23] David Flores, "Memories of War: Sources of Vietnam Veteran Pro- and Antiwar Political Attitudes." *Sociological Forum 29, no. 1* (2014): 98-119. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43653934, 107.

In April 1967, *The New York Times* published an article titled "The Draft: Cassius vs. Army." This article appeared in *The New York Times* as part of its coverage of both the Vietnam War and Muhammad Ali's draft protest. As a primary source, newspapers provide a snapshot of how the public views a certain event as it occurs. Newspapers project what the population is thinking and feeling, but also may influence how a reader perceives an event that is reported. The author of "The Draft" is critical of Ali's decision because he feels that Ali is highlighting political issues that he, as an athlete, should not engage in. Furthermore, the author is wary of the effect that Ali's decision will have on the African American community. Looking at the article one can see how the narrative surrounding Muhammad Ali in relation to the Vietnam War was constructed, and how this narrative influenced the public's thoughts about the war and Ali.

The narrative of the article shows the fear that Ali's draft refusal could become a symbol for others to act in the same manner. The author is particularly concerned with how Ali's actions may influence the African American community and more specifically that the community would embrace Ali's actions and words and decide to likewise forego the draft. "But beyond those essentially legalistic steps may lie greater consequences, not only for Clay himself, but for the nation's Negroes and indeed for the nation itself."[24] One of the main points of contention that the author has with Ali's decision is the feared effect that it will have on the African American population. "It is the possibility that Clay may become a new symbol for and rallying point for opposition to the draft and the Vietnam war."[25] The author is concerned that Ali's choices may lead other African Americans to follow him in refusing the draft. The author of this article makes a conscious choice to go to Harlem, a predominantly black community, in order to provide

[24] "The Draft: Cassius vs. Army," *The New York Times*, April 30, 1967, https://search-proquest-com.proxy.swarthmore.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/117647055/abstract/7542D1B3112F42B8PQ/1?accountid=14194.
[25] "The Draft".

additional materials for his writing. By going to Harlem and interviewing people in the city, the author makes the assumption that Ali's actions would only influence the black community. The author, therefore, labels Ali strictly by his race furthering the notion that Muhammad Ali can be categorized through only one identity, his black identity.

In looking at the publications of *The New York Times,* one can see how many writers were trying to place Ali into only one category, be it his athletic ability, race, or religion. Muhammad Ali, however, never wanted to identify himself as only one thing. Ali's own words about his protest showcase the fact that he did not want to be placed into a box, with his actions having limited options. As Ali notes in a statement he read in 1967 after his refusal to be drafted, "I strongly object to the fact that so many newspapers have given the American public and the world the impression that I have only two alternatives in taking this stand: either I go to jail or go to the Army."[26] The public continuously told Ali that he should fit a certain image and these words show how Ali disliked being told what his options were. Ali, believing himself to be a conscientious objector based on his religion, did not see his options as being so limited. Objecting to how his choices were portrayed by the media shows how Ali did not want to be categorized as being one-dimensional with limited choices.

One *Times* writer, however, broke the narrative of the published writings on Muhammad Ali. Robert Lipsyte presented Ali as someone who was unable to occupy a solitary space, and wrote about the multi-dimensional figure of Ali as Ali saw himself. In Lipsyte's article published in May of 1967, "I'm Free to be who I want," Lipsyte presented the multidimensional picture of

[26] Robert Lipsyte, "Clay Refuses Army Oath: Stripped of Boxing Crown: Induction Oath Refused by Clay," *The New York Times*, April 29, 1967, https://search-proquest-com.proxy.swarthmore.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/117736674/C9041EA7D9E24807PQ/1?accountid=14194.

Ali through his own words and perception of himself. Through Lipsyte's interview with Ali, readers were given a more intimate look into how Ali saw himself and the future that he was about to embark on. Within *The New York Times* articles that were published in 1967, there were very few one-on-one interviews with Muhammad Ali, which makes this article written by Lipsyte that much more crucial to understanding how Ali viewed himself in relation to the public's viewpoint of him. When talking with Lipsyte about his reasons to not submit to the demands of the American government, Ali comments, "you want me to be so scared of the white man I'll go and get two arms shot off and 10 medals so you can give me a small salary and pat my head and say, 'good boy, he fought for his country?'"[27] Ali is commenting on how he does not wish to fit the mold of an identity that the public desire him to have. The public has a perfect image, someone that is scared of the white man, takes their success and medals with grace, and fights for their country with pride. As they continue their discussion on the Vietnam War, Ali talks about the soldiers losing their lives, "every day, they die in Vietnam for nothing. I might as well die right here for something."[28] From Ali's words, one can see how Ali sees his protest as doing something meaningful that can help provide positive change. Lipsyte's viewpoint is unique in that it provides Ali the ability to use his voice when other writers were trying to push it aside and channel their own voice to create a highly controversial figure for the public.

An additional component of this article not seen in other publications of *The Times* is the respect that Lipsyte has for Ali. Other writers admired his boxing abilities; however, Lipsyte goes a step further in admiring Ali for both his abilities in the ring, but also his determination to stay true to his beliefs. For example, Lipsyte highlights this line of Ali's, "I don't have to be

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[27] Robert Lipsyte, "I'm Free to Be Who I Want," *The New York Times,* May 28, 1967, https://search- proquest-com.proxy.swarthmore.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/117760344/F2BDDD5C6F9B4BE6PQ/2?accountid=14194.
[28] Lipsyte, "I'm Free to Be Who I Want".

what you want me to be. I'm free to be who I want."[29] This comes after Ali made public his decision to become a member of the Nation of Islam. What is important here is the fact that Lipsyte admires Ali for being unconcerned with how others will view him and following what he believes in. Ali is aware that people want to place him into the box of a perfect heavyweight champion; however, this is not who he is. Ali says, "I'm free to be who I want," because he does not have to play the part that the public desires. As the article concludes, Lipsyte leaves the reader with this, "Ali took another cause, that of a minority religion, and sacrificed again, (…) he always did what he had to do, and never lost the almost magical purity that could believe, 'I ain't losing anything but gaining the world.'"[30] These concluding lines further the fact that Lipsyte provides a break from the coverage that had been in the majority of the articles of *The Times.* Many writers had been ridiculing Ali for sticking to his beliefs, ridiculing his religion, and what the religion had turned him into; by contrast, Lipsyte embraced the full picture of who Ali was. Doing this allowed Ali to talk to Lipsyte on an intimate level, with Lipsyte having a one-on-one conversation with Ali days before his draft case. Ali grants Lipsyte this opportunity because of the strong relationship that the pair of them had in addition to Lipsyte giving Ali the opportunity to speak his truth to the widespread readership of *The New York Times*.

Although much of the media coverage was negative towards Muhammad Ali during the late 1960s, this did not last as a new decade unfolded. One primary reason for this was the shifting attitude of the public towards America's involvement in the Vietnam War. As the 1970s began, the United States found itself entrenched in the War. At the start of the war, many Americans supported the government's decision to send troops to stop the spread of communism

[29] Lipsyte, "I'm Free to Be Who I Want".
[30] Lipsyte, "I'm Free to Be Who I Want".

in Asia. As the war progressed, however, more and more Americans found the war to be a mistake, because of the high death totals and a seemingly nonexistent end to the conflict. One Gallup poll tracked American public opinion towards the Vietnam War by asking the question of whether or not it was a mistake to send troops to Vietnam. When America began a large-scale involvement in 1965, only 24% believed the war as a mistake; by 1971 the average number of people that said it was a mistake was 60%.[31] The poll proves that Americans were beginning to see the war in a new light. No longer was it an American duty to fight, but a mistake that was leading to the death of thousands of young men.

As the portion of the population that opposed the war grew, Americans were finding ways to voice their displeasures with the government's decisions in Vietnam. Through anti-war demonstrations in city streets to college campuses, the American people voiced their opposition to America's involvement in the war. This increase in popularity of the anti-war movement directly translated to the media's coverage of the war in general. Televisions in the homes of the majority of Americans brought live images of the dead and dying American soldiers in Vietnam. From this, the American public was constantly reminded of the horrors that were occurring across the seas in Asia. Because of the transition in how the Vietnam War was covered and viewed by the public, the coverage of Muhammad Ali also transitioned. As the 1970s began, the coverage of Muhammad Ali within *The New York Times* shifted. Less emphasis was placed on how Ali was uprooting the ideals of America; instead, writers were uplifting his character. In

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[31] Frank Newport and Joseph Carroll, "Iraq Versus Vietnam: A Comparison of Public Opinion," *Gallup*, June 7, 2017, https://news.gallup.com/poll/18097/iraq-versus-vietnam-comparison-public-opinion.aspx.

looking at the coverage of his Supreme Court case in 1971 and his return to boxing that followed, this shift becomes evident.

After refusing to step forward to join the military in 1967, Muhammad Ali was charged with draft evasion and sentenced to five years in prison and a $10,000 fine. After appealing this sentence based on being a minster of Islam, Ali's case would reach the United States Supreme Court in 1971. Ali would win his Supreme Court case as the justices unanimously voted 8-0 in support of Ali's conscientious objection. This decision by the Court was immense for the anti-war movement as it gave the movement more credibility amongst the American people. In addition, the decision would allow more eligible fighting men to refuse the draft as the Court made conscientious objection legal under the U.S. Constitution. One *New York Times* article highlights the importance of this decision as, "it establishes another landmark in the continuing fight for freedom of conscience under the Constitution."[32] As the article notes, Ali's case was crucial because it paved the way for many other Americans to claim conscientious objection so that they would not have to risk their lives in Vietnam. Through Ali's notoriety as the heavyweight champion, the story of the fight of a black minister of Islam and his success against the government was told by the media and heard by the public. Gerald Early, a professor of literature, describes what Ali meant for not only the anti-war movement, but also the black population. Early reminisces about this moment in his essay, "Tales of the Wonderboy" that was published in 1998:

> When he refused, I felt something greater than pride: I felt as though my honor as a black boy had been defeated, my honor as a human being. He was the grand knight, after all, the dragon slayer. And I felt myself, little inner- city boy that I was, his apprentice to the grand imagination, the grand daring. The day that Ali

[32] "Ali's Unanimous Decision," *The New York Times*, July 5, 1971, https://search-proquest-com.proxy.swarthmore.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/119221580/citation/8F546B1855E2408EPQ/1?accountid=14194.

> refused the draft, I cried in my room. I cried for him and for myself, for my future and his, for all our black possibilities.[33]

Through Early, one sees what it meant for a young black boy to see someone of his race stand up against the system. Early is witnessing a war that is disproportionately killing young black men, knowing that he could be one of those men; from his perspective, Ali's refusal gave him hope and pride, making Ali a hero for African American boys. Because of the shift in the anti-war sentiment as the 1970s began, the positive image of Ali and his success at the Supreme Court could be reported in *The New York Times*. As the media coverage became less negative, public perception of Ali shifted in the positive direction.

With this change in opinion on Ali's anti-war stance as the 1970s began, the American public also began to admit that Muhammad Ali was a tremendous fighter. A *New York Times* article published in 1970 recaps Muhammad Ali's fight against Jerry Quarry. Author Arthur Daley writes about the ability of Muhammad Ali, "Cassius appeared so sleek, so fast and so powerful that awed ringsiders wondered how much he had lost- if anything- by the idleness enforced on him."[34] In his article, Daley creates an image of Ali the boxer that was rarely seen in earlier published articles in *The New York Times.* Daley provides a positive image of Ali, calling him "sleek" in appearance and "fast and powerful" in addition to mentioning how he was impressed by Ali's "dazzling artistry." When covering Ali's earlier fights with Liston and Patterson, writers found ways to discredit Ali's wins, by saying that the fights were fixed or that his opponents were injured instead of admitting to the obvious, Ali was a great fighter. It is also telling how Daley refers to Ali's time away from the ring. Rather than referring to Ali's time in exile from

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[33] Remnick, 291.
[34] Arthur Daley, "Sports of the Times: Muhammad Ali is Back on Top," *The New York Times*, October 28, 1970, https://search-proquest-com.proxy.swarthmore.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/117812911/abstract/F9620B16FE4D44AEPQ/1?accountid=14194.

boxing as being Ali's choice in refusing the draft, Daley changes the prior narrative to be that his time away was due to "the idleness enforced on him." The manner in which people were thinking about Muhammad Ali in the 1970s allowed for this transition to occur and for Ali's greatness as a boxer to be conveyed in the *Times*. Daley was one of the writers that was part of this transition and was able to share his view of how impressive it was to watch Ali firsthand deliver his punches.

Another instance of the changing narrative of Muhammad Ali in the 1970s is on display in an article published in *The Times* covering Ali's visit to West Point in 1972. Ali visited West Point as an analyst for ABC's broadcasting of the boxing Olympic Trials. Within the article, one sees the positive interactions that Ali had with these soldiers and how the soldiers were in turn thinking about Ali. "His popularity among the cadets themselves was indicated last year in a poll of the varsity football team. Asked to name their sports idol, their first choice was Dick Butkus, the Chicago Bears' middle linebacker. Ali ranked second."[35] Ali's second place ranking shows that the soldiers were thinking about Ali in a positive manner. Despite the fact that Ali had not been able to box regularly during his punishment for protesting the draft, Ali was still rated extremely highly by these individuals in their list of favorite athletes. Even though the cadets never had an opportunity to see Ali box because of his ban from the sport, they still saw him as one of their favorite athletes of the times. The folklore of Ali's ability in his sport outweighed the animosity that he received because of his decision regarding the draft. This is especially surprising as men serving in the military may have been expected to hold Ali's draft refusal against him. This article establishes that a generational gap existed between the soldiers when it

[35] Dave Anderson, "Ali Captures West Point: Muhammad Ali Pays a Visit to the Army -- For the Olympic Trials." *The New York Times*, August 6, 1972. https://search-proquest-com.proxy.swarthmore.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/119527914/abstract/B10DF6249D8C4B35PQ/1?accountid=14194.

came to how they viewed the character of Muhammad Ali. "'I'd say,' a young officer estimated, 'that from captain up, the officers considered him a draft dodger. From captain down they recognize him as an athlete.'"[36] Even though these cadets did not oppose the war, they still did not share the same harsh feelings towards Muhammad Ali as their superiors within the military. This proves that there was a shift in how people were thinking about Muhammad Ali in conjunction with the Vietnam War. The young soldiers did not categorize Ali by his draft protest, but instead by his athletic abilities. This article published in 1972 emphasizes the fact that there was a shift in how Muhammad Ali was thought of and covered within the news media. The younger generation read the more positive media reports, like that of Daley, and saw Ali for his greatness inside the ring. The West Point article evidences the resulting shift and the interaction between Ali and the soldiers proves that people were beginning to think about Ali in a new light from the manner people thought of him in the late 1960s.

In the introduction to their essay "Race/Religion/War: An Introduction," authors Feldman and Medovoi highlight the purpose of their writing, "our key observation is that race, religion, and war come together as a meaningful constellation precisely because they together underpin one dominant strategy of the power that we call the political."[37] This observation that the authors make comes to fruition in the study of Muhammad Ali's draft protest of the Vietnam War. Muhammad Ali as a Black Muslim brought forth a collision of these three facets – race, religion, and war – as he fought for his beliefs and freedom of choice in a conflict that generated enormous amounts of controversy. There is no question today that the Vietnam War was one of the greatest disasters in American history. Additionally, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that

[36] Anderson, "Ali Captures West Point".
[37] Keith Feldman and Leerom Medovoi. "Race/Religion/War: An Introduction," *Social Text* 34, *no. 4* (December 2016): 1–17, 1.

Muhammad Ali was a generational figure who was a tremendous individual. Ali received many honors during his later life. For example, Ali was a member of the inaugural class of the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1990; he lit the Olympic flame during the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia; and in 2005 he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, what may seem clear today about Vietnam and Muhammad Ali was not. There was the belief that America as a nation could bring freedom to another country threatened by communism. In addition, the notion that each American when called upon must support that cause of the great nation was a firm belief for many Americans. Muhammad Ali argued against this vision by protesting the Vietnam War's draft and refusing to serve his country based upon his religious beliefs. Muhammad Ali believed in the stance he took, and had a certain idea of how he wanted his life to be remembered. His self-image, however, was not the same as that constructed by the writings of *The New York Times*. *The Times* sought to categorize Ali simply in a negative fashion despite the fact that he was a multidimensional individual that did not fit into the standard categories of society. The many facets of Ali made him a difficult person for the media to write about and for the public to understand; however, that did not stop journalists from publishing numerous articles that did not portray him fully.

Because of his draft decision, a certain image of Ali was constructed that highlighted his "anti-American" values. Journalists are aware of this ability to influence the public as they weave tales of admiration for events and people that they want the American public to view favorably and stories of concern and doubt regarding items that they want the public to view with hostility. Because of this power, the media plays a crucial role in determining how American public opinion is shaped and formed surrounding different events and time periods of history. The articles within *The New York Times* became a mirror for how the public was thinking about

Muhammad Ali and subsequently the Vietnam War. The coverage of Ali in 1967, when he first refused to join the army was negative due to the positive opinions of the Vietnam War. This negative coverage, however, changed over time because of the shifting public opinions regarding America's involvement in Vietnam. This shifting opinion towards Vietnam directly translated to the coverage of Muhammad Ali because of his public representation of the anti-war movement. As public support of the Vietnam War waned, public support of Ali intensified. Ali mentions in *The Greatest,* "the public attitude toward the war will shift, and the vast majority will oppose it even stronger than I did."[38] These words appear in his autobiography when Ali discusses his standing still in front of the Houston Draft board instead of stepping forward to join the Army. The thoughts that Ali had in that moment would turn out to be true, showing how much belief Ali had in himself despite the unfavorable public opinion that was generated against him. The way that Muhammad Ali was projected to a society in the midst of a polarizing war was not only about public perception of Ali the individual, but also about Ali as the anti-war figurehead. Understanding how the media reflects public opinion is crucial to understanding how the media portrays public figures such as Ali. With that recognition, the media's portrayal of Muhammad Ali during the time of his draft protest then becomes a lens into looking at how the opinions of Americans towards the Vietnam War was changing during the course of the time period.

[38] Ali, 289.

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