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# Ideas

FROM THE NATIONAL HUMANITIES CENTER

**Muhammad Ali as Third-World Hero**  
*by Gerald Early*



Muhammad Ali prays at the Hussein Mosque, Cairo, Egypt, June 1964 (Getty Images).

Good and Bad, I define these terms  
Quite clear, no doubt, somehow...

Bob Dylan, "My Back Pages"

All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned....  
Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*

# Muhammad Ali as Third-World Hero

Gerald Early

## King of the World, 1964

In his November 1975 *Playboy* magazine interview, Muhammad Ali, still flush from having regained the heavyweight title in October 1974 in a stunning upset of heavily favored George Foreman, exclaimed, “You can go to Japan, China, all the European, African, Arab, and South American countries and, man, they know me. I can’t name a country where they *don’t* know me. If another fighter’s goin’ to be that big, he’s goin’ to have to be a Muslim, or else he won’t get to nations like Indonesia, Lebanon, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Syria, Egypt, and Turkey—those are all countries that don’t usually follow boxing. He might even have to be named Muhammad because Muhammad is the most common name in the world.”

No other athlete, American or foreign, and certainly no other boxer, in history could claim such broad international popularity as Ali had at the height of his fame in the nineteen-sixties and -seventies, particularly in many of the countries that make up what is known as the Third World. Indeed, every nation Ali named in this interview was represented at the 1955 Bandung, or Afro-Asian Unity, Conference, an event that intensified the already prominent, twentieth-century idea of a “colored” consciousness or a unity of purpose among colonized dark-skinned peoples against the European or white world. And, of course, nearly all the countries he named have large Muslim populations. For a

time, Muhammad Ali was not only the most famous American Muslim but was, arguably, the most famous Muslim in the world.

It might be said that herein lies the tale, in part, of American liberalism’s confrontation with Islam, except it is unclear what type of Muslim Ali was supposed to be in the nineteen-sixties or what precise doctrine he believed, only that he most vigorously protested the idea of being American (while arguing that his choice of religious beliefs was his right as an American) or Christian and that he thought whites were devils, that God, named Allah, was black, and that divine retribution would redeem black-skinned people after they had shown themselves worthy through their own efforts. While these beliefs might be packaged for the believer as something “Islamic,” there was little to distinguish them from garden-variety black messianic nationalism. The fact may be that “Islam” may have served to revitalize and historicize black messianic nationalism for a black citizenry that had come to suspect the West instead of being in awe of it. It would be a mistake, in the light of the terrorist attack of September

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11, 2001, to say that the United States historically has been anti-Islam or that whites have been anti-Islamic. Just as it would be equally wrong to say that African Americans have been attracted to Islam because they see it as a “black” religion. (The overwhelming majority of African Americans who have become Muslims did so because they thought of Islam as a truly multiracial religion, not a black one.) The confrontation between Ali’s orthodox racial reactionism and American liberalism demonstrated liberalism’s abhorrence of racialized religion and discomfort at having exposed as racial its own “invisible,” “universalist” assumptions.

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“You can go to Japan, China,  
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Ali, I suggest, was the biggest hero of the entire colored world in the post-World War II era, for several reasons. He combined protest and action and exhibited fierce racial pride and extraordinary egotism about his own powers—no black public figure in history seemed more blatantly in love with his own being and his own possibilities than Ali, and for peoples denigrated because of their color and their supposed “inferiority” Ali’s ego had no small meaning. Ali also displayed both a racialized and universalist spirituality much in keeping with the sort of “Orientalism” or

quest for Eastern spiritual purity that characterized a number of black American conversions to Islam in the nineteen-sixties and even earlier. This spirituality characterized an important aspect of black cultural nationalism generally, at that time, because it possessed not only a very strong religious impulse but also a very strong tendency toward aesthetics and self-help psychology.

(To digress for a moment, the role of black nationalism in the sixties as both religion and aesthetics underscores something important. Ali’s emergence as a virtuous hero of color for both black America and the world is of a psychological piece with the emergence of the sixties avant-garde jazz of John Coltrane, Archie Shepp, Max Roach, Pharoah Sanders, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, in that all of them tried to blend black nationalism and black entrepreneurship with a black aesthetic and, thus, promoted the “healing” power of a so-called pure “black” music as therapy. Ali’s emergence is also of a piece with Maulani Ron Karenga’s Kawaiida, written in 1966, whose seven principles became the basis for the African American holiday, Kwanzaa, an act designed to make black nationalism an aesthetic, entrepreneurial, and religious expression as well as an act of therapy.)

Finally, Ali showed no pretension or sense of privilege in feeling that people owed him homage for being champion. He saw his public role as the colored, Islamic heavyweight champion as a series of duties, not indulgences, though, of course, Ali, like nearly all champion boxers, enjoyed the indulgences that are considered the perks of his trade: sex with numerous beautiful women, conspicuous consumption of some sort or another, an army of flunkies and yes-men to placate his temper, satisfy his whims, protect him from his fans, and keep him from being lonely—

Cassius Clay and the Beatles clown during a New York stop on the band’s promotional tour, February 1964 (Getty Images).



anything less would be considered strangely amiss. On balance, however, Ali was the egotistical hero as selfless padrone and patriarch, as faithful brother.

An example illustrates this last point: in the 1975 *Playboy* interview, Ali explained why he added former welterweight champion Kid Gavilan to his entourage: “See, once you become a Muslim, you want for your brother what you want for yourself.” Gavilan, whose real name was Gerardo Gonzalez, was born in 1926, grew up in Cuba, and took his name from a Havana café called El Gavilan—the hawk. Gavilan was very popular with early television audiences and held the welterweight title from 1951 to 1954. It was his bolo punch, a kind of wind-up uppercut, that Ali would effect for comic purposes in the waning days of his career. Ali continued, “For instance, Kid Gavilan was a black boxing champion who had trouble in Cuba after he retired and he wound up in Miami working in a park. Newspaper reporters used to write stories about it that would embarrass Kid Gavilan and when I heard what he was doing, I thought, ‘Kid Gavilan ain’t gonna work in no park.’ So I found Kid Gavilan and now he works for me, and I pay him a lot better than what he made in the park.” It is clear from Ali’s explanation that he saw his duties as a remarkable conflation of the religious and the racial. Ali’s sponsorship, in truth, is not unusual at all in the sport of boxing; ex-champions—aged, broke, and broken—are often made members of a new champion’s circle, a reflection of how tradition and respect, condescension and honor, are passed down and preserved in the profession. Ali, here, interprets it as religious (a Muslim does these sorts of things even for non-Muslims like Gavilan) and racial (although Gavilan is Cuban, he is a black man, and blackness transcends nations; thus, in aiding him, Ali symbolically fulfills his own vision of ministering aid to the colored or Pan-African world). Ali sees his entourage as a form of not just patronage—many boxers and celebrities see

their circle of cronies and flunkies in this way—but as a kind of symbolic diasporic ingathering. Ali was, during his active days as a boxer, nearly as mythical a figure of a unified colored world as Gandhi, who came closest to this role before Ali.

### **Muhammad Ali and the Nation of Islam**

At the same time that Ali was enjoying his soaring popularity, Malcolm X was trying very hard to be a sort of black American ambassador to the Third World. The Marxist-Leninist black arts advocate Amiri Baraka called Malcolm “a statesman,” a striking and not entirely inappropriate hyperbole, as it was surely Malcolm’s outsized ambition to be the head of a black American state. This was Malcolm’s particular goal after his departure from the Nation of Islam in 1964, when he tried to use Islam to create a world community of color, and his race to create a form of Pan-Africanism. Malcolm, however, never came close to Ali’s level of hero worship or popularity. One has only to examine accounts of Ali’s 1964 African tour for proof of this mass acceptance.

Malcolm had become friendly with Ali before the young fighter fought for the title against Sonny Liston on February 25, 1964. Indeed, he and his family were present at Ali’s Miami Beach training camp before that fight, much to the chagrin of the fight’s promoters. It was Malcolm who fired up Ali with the idea that the fight was a crusade, a religious war between the Crescent and the Cross. In truth, Liston—a poor, uneducated black man who grew up a sharecropper’s son in an intensely racist Arkansas, went to prison for armed robbery, and had been a thumb-crusher for organized crime—made an unusually inappropriate symbol for either Christianity or the West, unless one were to argue that Liston was a victim of both, but certainly it inspired Ali, who went on to use this idea in subsequent fights against black “infidels.” Malcolm had a ring-side seat at the fight and was probably the only member of the Nation of Islam, or per-

haps one of a handful, who actually thought Ali would beat the heavily favored Liston.

Rumors that Ali would announce his conversion to Islam had been circulating in the press for weeks before the Liston fight; Ali formally announced it immediately after his victory. Although Malcolm had been suspended by Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, in November 1963, for making inappropriate—actually, imprudent—remarks about the assassination of President Kennedy, he was still the most well-known so-called Black Muslim of the time. Wherever he went, the press followed, particularly to the camp of the handsome, loud-mouthed, agitated, energetic heavyweight fighter known then as Cassius Marcellus Clay.

Despite their close relationship, Malcolm X did not convert Ali. They first met in Detroit in 1962. By then, Ali was already a fellow traveler, if not a member of the Nation of Islam. Ali had been attending Nation of Islam meetings for about three years before he announced his membership. Thomas Hauser, in *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, quotes Ali on the clandestine nature of his early years as a Muslim: “I’d sneak into Nation of Islam meetings through the back door. I didn’t want people to know I was there. I was afraid, if they knew, I wouldn’t be allowed to fight for the title. Later on, I learned to stand up for my beliefs.” Ali first learned of the organization at a Golden Glove Tournament, in Chicago, in 1959. His first teachers were Abdul Rahaman, Ishmael Sabakhan, and Jeremiah Shabazz. Malcolm came a little later and thoroughly mesmerized young Clay with his pride, rhetoric, and logic. Clay probably would have become a Muslim if he had never met Malcolm, but Malcolm provided compelling affirmation for the young boxer from Louisville. He particularly needed Malcolm at the first Liston fight, in 1964, because so few people thought he would win and the Nation of Islam, on the whole, officially, gave him very little support.

At the time, young Clay did not know that even Elijah Muhammad thought he would lose and had told Malcolm not to associate himself with the fighter for fear that his inevitable defeat would reflect poorly on the Nation. Moreover, Elijah Muhammad despised the sport of prizefighting. He had

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not been especially keen about having Clay as a member when the brash athlete first joined the Nation of Islam. John Ali, the organization’s national secretary, condemned Shabazz when he learned that Clay was being lured into the organization. According to Hauser, Shabazz said, “The Messenger [Elijah Muhammad] told me I’d been sent to the

South to make converts, not to fool around with fighters.” The Nation of Islam’s inner circle thought Clay was a clown and kept him at arm’s length, until after he won the championship.

Despite this, by the time Ali fought Liston for a second time (immediate return bouts were a standard practice in big-time boxing at the time), in Lewiston, Maine, in May 1965, a few months after members of the Nation of Islam murdered Malcolm, Ali had thoroughly repudiated their friendship. He would remain absolutely loyal to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and some aspects of his life were completely controlled by the Nation. In many respects, Ali was an obedient, submissive member of the Nation, and the organization

took considerable advantage of it, but Ali was also something of an exception because he became, after all, the goose that laid golden eggs. Certainly, no one expected *him* to be out on street corners hawking bean pies and copies of *Muhammad Speaks*, the sect’s newspaper. Where would the Nation of Islam have been after the assassination of Malcolm, were it not for the stylish, charismatic boxer in its fold?

Immediately after Ali won the title from Liston, the rift that existed between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad intensified: Malcolm, by far the most intelligent and famous of all the organization’s ministers, left to form his own group. Malcolm had reportedly made several attempts to reconcile with

Ali meets with residents of a Notting Hill, London, children's home, May 15, 1966 (Getty Images).





## Ali in Africa

Osman Karriem, who arranged Ali's spring 1964 African tour, actually discussed the idea with Malcolm, who encouraged him to take Ali abroad. Karriem had some idea that Ali would be well received abroad, for the champion was a distinct drawing card among Third-World diplomats and ambassadors when he visited the United Nations with Malcolm, a few days after the young fighter won the championship. Hauser quotes Karriem: "I arranged the trip." "To me, it was necessary to give the kid some breathing room. There was so much going on in his life, and this was a way to take him out of the line of fire." Ali left for Africa on May 14, 1964, with his brother, Rahaman, also a member of the Nation of Islam, Howard Bingham, Karriem, and Herbert Muhammad, one of Elijah Muhammad's eight legitimate children.

It was while in Ghana that Ali made his break with Malcolm public. The men crossed paths at the Hotel Ambassador, in Accra. Malcolm was leaving Ghana, having just finished a stay there that included a session with

Kwame Nkrumah, the first premier of an independent Ghana, a lecture at the University of Ghana, and a meeting with the colony of expatriate black Americans who were living in Ghana, including Maya Angelou and Julian Mayfield. Before arriving in Ghana, Malcolm had completed the hajj, the holy journey to Mecca that every devout Muslim is required to make once in this lifetime, thus signifying his spiritual break from Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. When Malcolm made an overture to greet him, Ali pointedly snubbed him.

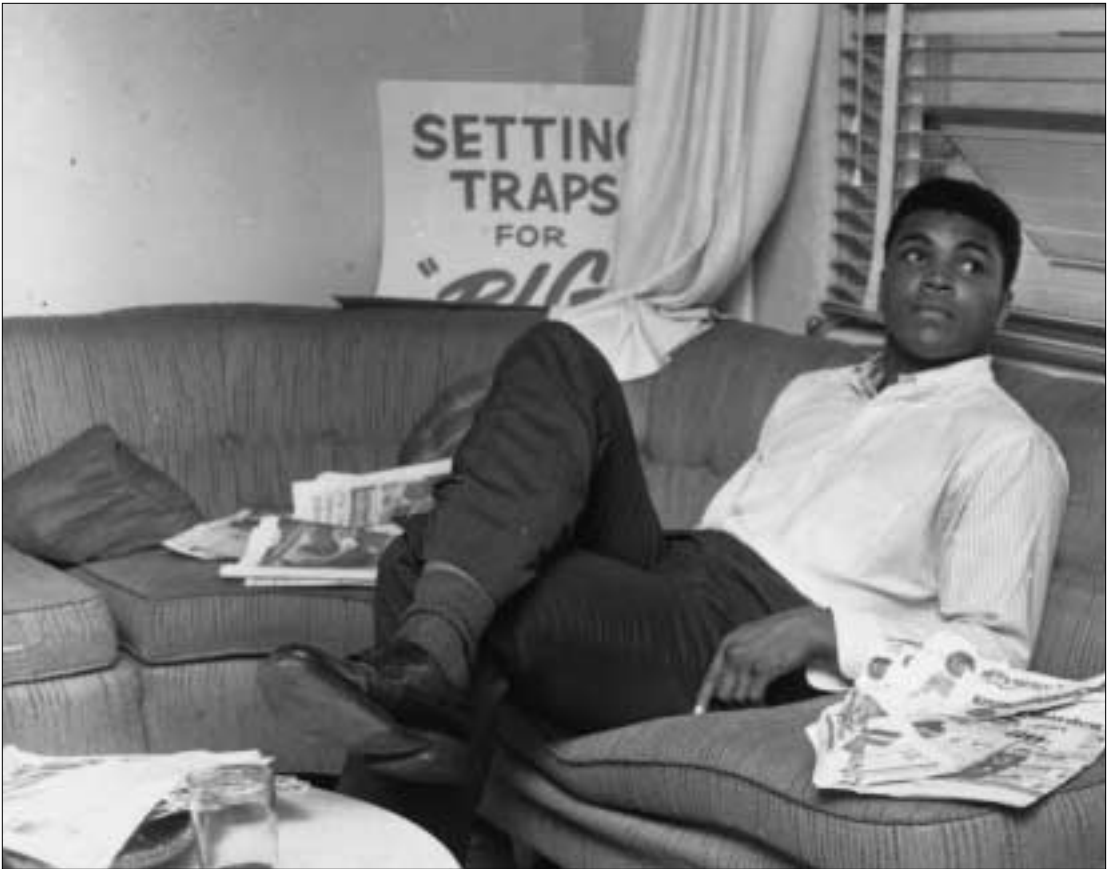
Whereas Ali's visit to Ghana was covered in the Ghanaian papers every day he was in the country, Malcolm, although he was given press coverage, did not receive anything approaching that given Ali. Indeed, on Monday, May 18, and Tuesday, May 19, the *Evening News*, the newspaper founded by Nkrumah, ran huge front-page photos of the boxer. In the paper's May 19 edition, he was photographed wearing traditional African robes, accompanied by Nkrumah himself. It was not the only time that Ali was photographed wearing traditional African clothing while he was in Africa, so it comes as something of a surprise that when he saw Malcolm in Ghana, dressed as a devout Muslim in white, Ali said to reporters, "Did you get a look at Malcolm? Dressed in that funny white robe and wearing a beard and walking with that cane that looked like a prophet's stick? Man, he's gone. He's gone so far out, he's out completely." Ali either was being hypocritical or was unaware of traditional Muslim attire for the penitents that have taken the hajj. The latter is very possible, because the Nation of Islam did not emphasize taking the hajj.

While in Ghana, Ali fought some exhibition matches and made several public appearances that were all very well attended. In the May 18 sports section of the *Evening News*, the crowd that greeted Ali at the airport in Accra was described this way: "A large enthusiastic crowd, carrying placards, some of

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[Ali's] name change turned out to be one of the most startling and contentious symbolic acts in American race relations in the nineteen-sixties. Never were so many so annoyed by something that was seemingly so minor.

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Clay relaxes after defeating Liston for the heavyweight belt, Miami Beach, February 25, 1964 (Getty Images).

which read 'YOU ARE WELCOME HOME, KING OF THE WORLD,' 'CASSIUS CLAY YOU ARE ON YOUR LAND,' 'GHANA IS YOUR MOTHERLAND CASSIUS CLAY,' all added to the glamour of the occasion."

There was also a certain level of disorganization to Ali's African tour. Ghanaian papers reported that his trip would include visits to Nigeria, the Ivory Coast, Guinea, Mali, Egypt (or, as it was called at that time, the United Arab Republic), and Algeria. In fact, Ali's trip lasted about a month and covered only Ghana, Nigeria, and Egypt. (A tour such as the one described in the Ghanaian papers would have taken at least two months.) The

more elaborate itinerary may have been a case of Ali or someone in his circle exaggerating the extent and length of the tour, or perhaps the original intention had been for the tour to be far longer than it was. In any case, it seems clear that the itinerary was somewhat in a state of flux, even when Ali arrived.

On May 20, Ali was quoted in the Ghana press about his visit with Nkrumah: "When the two of us met last Monday at Flagstaff House, I humbled myself before him, a thing I rarely do, because I saw in him a dedicated man who is anxious to free Africa and bring about unity." The fact that Ali was nearly insufferably proud did not offend his African

audience. It seemed to thrill them. He also expressed a wish to defend his title in Africa, which further excited his audience, because no heavyweight boxing championship match had ever been held in sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa. Ali was precisely the larger-than-life figure that his audience expected and wanted; the fact that he was a black American “coming home” made him even more mythical and appealing.

Ali’s trip to Nigeria was cut short, from a week to three days. Mark Kram, in *Ghosts of Manila: The Fateful Blood Feud between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier*—published in 2001 and without question, along with Nick Tosches’s recent biography of Sonny Liston, one of the most bitterly critical books on Ali ever written—describes Ali’s trip to Nigeria in scathing terms: “Ali stayed long enough to insult the looks of Nigerian women and, saying it was just a little place, he beat it to Egypt, the fortress of mighty Islam and home to the women he had remembered from Cecil B. DeMille epics.”

In fact, what happened in Nigeria is a bit more complicated than Kram’s quick assessment. Ali cut short the trip in part because he wanted to go to Egypt and Egypt particularly wanted to have him. But it is unclear when this was decided. The June 2, 1964, edition of the *Daily Times*, one of Nigeria’s major papers, contained a considerable spread on Ali’s arrival at Lagos airport and reported that his stay would last only three days. Thus, even before any remarks about the looks of Nigerian women, even before he arrived in Nigeria, the visit had been cut short from a week, so it was not likely that it was shortened as a result of what happened in that country. Huge crowds greeted him, holding signs that read “HAPPY BACK HOME MOHAMMAD ALI KING OF THE WORLD.” When Ali alighted from his plane, he cried to the crowd, “I Am King of the World.” The crowd shouted its assent. (Ali, during his African visit, was commonly referred to in the press and among

the crowds as the King of the World. Unlike in the Ghanaian press, Ali was commonly referred to in the Nigerian press by his Islamic name. He met local dignitaries and appeared publicly in African traditional dress.)

The controversy over Ali’s truncated visit to Nigeria (he did not box any exhibitions there) was discussed fully in a column in the June 8, 1964, issue of the *Daily Times* by Cee-Kay, who had covered Ali’s entire visit. The writer blamed the National Sports Council, a government agency, for its poor organization and planning of the event. Cee-Kay argues, convincingly, that Nigeria was actually a late addition to Ali’s schedule, after he had already made arrangements to go to Egypt. In discussing the poor planning, Cee-Kay pointed out that there was no convertible at the airport to take Ali on his motorcade journey. The photos in the papers show Ali sitting on top of a small car with a sunroof. Ali, in fact, had to take a taxi, at his own expense, when he departed for the airport three days later. Also, there were problems when he was taken to his hotel from the airport and then hastily taken to a dignitary’s house for lunch. Ali apparently did make remarks about Nigerian women, although precisely what he said is unclear, and about how much more significant Egypt was for him as a Muslim. His preference for Egypt was clearly because he saw it as the center of Islamic culture and, like many Afrocentrist-minded blacks, was impressed by the fact that the country has monuments, unrelated, of course, to its Islamic heritage, but rather to a “glorious” African past of empire and conquest that also happens to impress white folk. The Nation of Islam never focused on sub-Saharan Africa and largely built its myths on connections between black Americans and the Middle East. It was not for nothing that Elijah Muhammad constantly spoke of “the Asiatic black man.”

Nearly every day of Ali’s two-week visit to Egypt, that country’s press gave extensive coverage to the boxing hero, including a front-page story in the *Egyptian Gazette*, on June 4,

1964, to announce his arrival. While in Egypt, Ali made his most blatantly political statement to the press, when, on June 10, he gave this account to the *Egyptian Gazette* of his watching a film about the battle of Port Said: "Commenting on the film he saw on the Suez battle, Clay said that during this battle the U.S. Press tried to make it appear as an Arab aggression against Israel and an attempt by Israel to defend itself against this aggression. 'I have now understood the truth about the battle. I now know that it was an aggression against you. I wish such an aggression would take place now and I should have been pleased to fight on your side and under your flag,' he stressed." That remark is, of course, interesting in its implications in light of Ali's subsequent quarrel with the United States Selective Service Act and his refusal to fight in Vietnam. Would fighting for Egypt against Israel be considered religious or political? Was the intense Arab nationalism of the moment a proxy for a Pan-Islamic world in which certain black American believers could exercise their anti-Westernism, or was it a proxy for a "colored" world of heightened racial nationalism? Exactly what kind of conscientious objector was Ali? How can one tease apart his religion from his politics when his religious conversion seemed nothing more than the militantly mystical reinscription of a racialized political commitment?

On the whole, despite the problems in Nigeria, the African tour was an enormous success for Ali and certainly must have buoyed his spirits, because he now knew he had an incredibly large following in African and Muslim countries. There was an alternative for him, if events did not work out in the United States because of the intensely hostile reaction to his Islamic conversion. Also, the trip established him as the new star of the Nation of Islam. Granted, the Nation's own outreach to the Middle East helped, in some measure, to make this trip possible, but Ali received press coverage and attracted crowds that far exceeded the receptions of either

Malcolm X or Elijah Muhammad on their visits to the Third-World Muslim nations a few years earlier or Malcolm's far more extensive spring 1964 trip that included stops in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Egypt, Nigeria, Ghana, and Algeria, where he met with several diplomats and heads of state. Malcolm was an exciting political figure and rhetorician, but Ali was something heroic, glamorous, a knight, a prince, a star. He was, ultimately, for everyone most useful because he was an athlete and less of a threat to the interests of those who promoted his heroism or admired his physical skills, because he was not, after all, a truly politically minded person and had no real ambitions in the realm of politics. Ali was right: in a way, he was, remarkably, what no other athlete or American boxer had been before: the young, unvarnished king of a strange, new world.

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### Further Reading

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