

ALI

A Life

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philosophy which attaches to us by association. Finally, the money rewards are so little that I can't believe any of us are interested in those. What I'd like to do is to give Cassius back his contract."

On February 16, 1966, Arthur Grafton circulated a memo saying they would begin making sure all their bills were paid and their obligations met so that they could "relinquish our contract to Clay" when the right time came. Meanwhile, Grafton said, he had reserved seventy-five ringside seats for Ali's fight against Ernie Terrell in Chicago if any members of the group wished to attend. It looked as if this would probably be their last chance to enjoy the perks of their association with boxing's heavyweight champion.

Many members of the group said they intended to attend the fight. For all the complications they had encountered, for all the frustrations, most of the men still adored and wished well for the young man whose career they had helped launch.

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No Quarrel

Muhammad Ali stretched his long legs and sank back into his lawn chair as he sang a refrain from Bob Dylan: "The answer is blowin' in the wind." It was February 17, 1966, and the question on Ali's mind was this: why had a draft board in Louisville reversed its previous position and classified his status as I-A, suddenly making him eligible for military service?

"Why me?" he asked as he reclined in front of his gray cement house in Miami, jawing with reporters, neighbors, and friends. "I can't understand it. How did they do this to me — the heavyweight champion of the world?"

Two years earlier, when he was calling himself Cassius Clay, he had failed his pre-induction mental exam. But since then, the war in Vietnam had escalated. From 1964 to 1965, the number of American soldiers dying in Vietnam increased ninefold, from about 200 to 1,900. In 1966, the death toll would triple to more than 6,000. More American soldiers were being called to duty, and many of those who had been deferred faced reevaluation. As the death count rose, so did the divide among American people. Many believed that if South Vietnam fell to a communist power, the rest of Southeast Asia would follow, while others argued that America had no reason to fight in a nation that even the new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, referred to privately as "a raggedy-ass, fourth-rate country."

Ali repeated his complaint to one TV reporter after another. Everyone knew the draft was rigged to protect wealthy white men from service, while the poor and dark-skinned served in disproportionately high numbers, he said. Around the house, members of the Nation of Islam warned Ali that he

would be sent to the frontlines right away, that white cracker sergeants were going to torture him.

"How can they reclassify me 1-A?" Ali asked.

"How can they do this without another test to see if I'm any wiser or wiser than last time?"

Reporter Bob Halloran of the CBS Evening News showed up with a cameraman. Halloran went inside, unplugged Ali's phone without Ali's knowing so they wouldn't be interrupted, and then began his interview, asking the boxer to react to the draft board's decision. Ali gave Halloran his reaction in a burst:

"Yes, sir, that was a great surprise to me," he said. "It was not me who said that I was classified 1-Y the last time. It was the government who tested me. It was the government who said that I'm not able. Now, in order to be 1-A I do not remember being called nowhere to be reclassified as 1-A. Two fellas got together and made the statement that I'm 1-A without knowing if I'm as good as I was last time or better. Now, they had 30 men to pick from in Louisville, Kentucky . . . To pick out the heavyweight champion of the whole world . . . You have a lot of men in baseball you could've called. You have a lot of young men in football they could've called. You have a lot of young men that they could've called . . . that have taken the test and are 1-A. Now, I was not 1-A last time they checked me. All of a sudden they seem to be anxious to put me in the army and throw me in the 1-A category out of thirty or forty men that they could've picked from, and two men made the decision. And another thing I don't understand, I really don't understand, is why me, a man who pays the salary of *at least* 50,000 men in Vietnam, a man who the government takes \$6 million from a year off of two fights, a man who can pay in two fights for three bomber planes."

That evening, Ali and his friends gathered in front of the TV to watch Walter Cronkite deliver the evening news on CBS. After a report about riots at a penal institution for girls in Indianapolis ("End of times!" someone in the room shouted at the TV), Cronkite introduced the story Ali had been waiting to see.

"In Louisville today . . ." Cronkite began.

"Shhh-shhh," said Ali.

Cronkite continued: "... heavyweight champion Cassius Clay's draft board reclassified him 1-A, making him immediately eligible for military service."

Ali was on the screen next, reciting his fiery pronouncements, complaining about being classified as 1-A. When it was done, Cronkite appeared again on the black-and-white TV to say there was no indication when Clay might be inducted or if his March 29 fight against Ernie Terrell would be canceled.

"That was a good one, wasn't it?" Ali asked the room.

Affirmation, along with a commercial for Chiffon margarine, came promptly.

"Did Lyndon Johnson hear what I just said?" Ali asked. "Was he watching that?"

"He was watching it!" someone shouted.

"Lyndon Johnson watches that? Two of my fights I pay for three bomber planes!"

Whether LBJ heard Ali's comments or not, millions of others did. The war in Vietnam provoked heated debate, but the majority of Americans in 1966 still supported the effort to fight communism in Southeast Asia. When TV viewers and newspaper readers learned that Ali did not want to serve in the military, it sounded like further proof of his selfishness and disdain for his own country. Ali never said he opposed the war on political, philosophical, or religious grounds; all he said was that he didn't want to go, that the draft board ought to be able to find someone to take his place, and that he didn't mind if the nation used his tax money to buy bomber jets to kill the enemy in Vietnam.

Two days later, he refined his argument, telling a reporter for the *Chicago Daily News* in a telephone interview, "I am a member of the Muslims and we don't go to wars unless they are declared by Allah Himself. I don't have no personal quarrel with those Viet Congs." He added, "All I know is they are considered as Asiatic black people and I don't have no fight with black people. I have never been over there and I have nothing against them." He had probably heard that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had taken a stand against the war, saying it was wrong to send black Americans to fight for democracy in Vietnam when they were denied freedom in their own country. Ali said he'd seen white men burning their draft cards on TV, and he'd heard that some congressmen opposed the war in Vietnam. "If they're against the war . . . why should we Muslims be for it?" he asked.

Ali was making a moral and religious argument now, one likely inspired by

his teacher, Elijah Muhammad, who had served four years in prison during World War II for refusing to fight. Sam Saxon, now going by the name Abdul Rahman, claimed he was the one who fed Ali the memorable line, "I don't have no personal quarrel with those Viet Congs." Later, a variation of the quote would be widely attributed to Ali: "I ain't got no quarrel with the Viet Cong." It would be coupled with another quote, one that would appear on T-shirts and posters bearing Ali's image, becoming one of the most powerful quotations ever attributed to an American athlete: "No Viet Cong ever called me nigger." There's little question that Ali uttered the first remark, or something close to it. But there's no evidence that he spoke the second sentence until years later on a movie set. As Stefan Fatsis noted in a 2016 essay, antiwar protesters had used the phrase "No Viet Cong ever called me nigger" before Ali spoke out on the war.

Nevertheless, in his refusal to accept the Viet Cong as his enemy, Ali showed how his views were coalescing. His enemy was not to be found in Southeast Asia, he said; his enemy was American racism.

When he recognized its resonance, Ali began repeating the line: "I have no quarrel with the Viet Cong," or the double-negative version, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong." It would become his most memorable quote in a lifetime of them. It was witty. It was rebellious. Whether it was calculated or not didn't matter because, essentially, it was true. Alone, with almost no support from the nation's intellectuals or religious leaders, he had taken a position that was, ironically, very much American. Like Henry David Thoreau, who refused to pay taxes that helped fund slavery and the Mexican-American War, and like the black men and women who refused to leave all-white lunch counters in the South, Ali was making a stand for civil disobedience, for freedom.

On February 28, 1966, eleven days after being notified of his new draft status, Ali submitted paperwork to the Selective Service claiming to be a conscientious objector. He claimed exemption to both combat and noncombat service, based on religious belief. He named Elijah Muhammad as the person he relied on most for religious guidance, said he believed in the use of force "only in sports and self defense," and cited as proof of his consistent religious conviction that he had divorced his wife, "whom I loved because she wouldn't conform to my Muslim faith."

Much of the form was completed by a New York attorney, Edward W. Jackson, who said Ali had asked him to record his answers. But on the first page, where a signature was required, Ali wrote:

Slave Name Cassius M Clay Jr RIGHT NAME Muhammad Ali.

Not surprisingly, Ali's refusal to fight for his country inspired more hatred.

Jim Murray of the *Los Angeles Times* snidely called Ali "the greatest American patriot since Benedict Arnold, the No. 1 candidate for the Congressional Medal of Prudence." Murray had a suggestion for Ali, whom he still referred to as Cassius Clay: "Go to some mother in Iowa—or Harlem for that matter. She will be sure to understand. Tell her you got this chance to make a big-money shot. Tell her you got two Cadillacs, an ex-wife, a whole religion to support . . . Suggest she send her son instead. You got no quarrel with the Viet Cong, you said. Well, I think you're on solid ground there, Cash. Why go to war for a lousy principle? I mean, look at it this way: half-a-million guys get killed in the Civil War fighting slavery. I bet half of them didn't even know what it was . . . The dumb clucks should've burned their draft cards. Or hired a lawyer, like you're doing. Well, there's a good side of it, Cash. If they hadn't died to free your folks, think of all the lawyers who would be out of work. Lordy. Elijah Muhammad himself might be broke. You're supporting the whole fez industry." Others writers questioned Ali's intelligence, saying that he didn't understand the issues or principles involved. A few speculated that Ali opposed the draft simply to drum up interest in his fight with Ernie Terrell. Several others claimed Ali was nothing but a puppet for Elijah Muhammad, that Ali would serve if Elijah told him to.

In Chicago, where Ali was supposed to fight Ernie Terrell, local newspapers urged cancellation of the bout. For the editorial writers at *Chicago's American*, the issue was Ali's unconvincing series of excuses for refusing the draft. The *Tribune*, meanwhile, didn't want to see money from the fight going to the Nation of Islam by way of Main Bout, Inc. Soon, veterans groups and local politicians joined the call for cancellation of the fight. At one point, Ali offered a half-hearted apology. "If I knew everything I had said on politics would have been taken that seriously . . . I never would have opened my mouth," he told United Press International.

Ali's team requested a formal hearing before the Illinois State Athletic

Commission. Bob Arum, who flew with Ali from Miami, thought the fight could be saved if Ali presented his political views tactfully. But before the hearing, Ali visited Elijah Muhammad, who was furious to hear that the boxer was considering another apology. That got Ali's attention, apparently. When he addressed the committee, Ali expressed regret for anyone who would be hurt financially by cancellation of the fight and for politicians who'd been put in an uncomfortable spot. But when a commission member asked if he was sorry for his unpatriotic comments, Ali said no, "I'm not apologizing for anything like that because I don't have to." About half an hour after the hearing, Illinois Attorney General William Clark, citing technicalities in licensing procedures, declared the match illegal. As Arum put it, "That's when they threw us out of Chicago."

Whether Ali was inspired by religion, politics, or devotion to Elijah Muhammad, many Americans had underestimated his commitment. His decision stoked the anger of white people, who said that the heavyweight champion was supposed to stand as a role model for American youth and a symbol of American strength. Perhaps less obvious was his effect on the black community, and in particular on young black men, for whom Ali was emerging as a powerful icon. For many young and rebellious black people, Ali's religion didn't matter; the important thing was that he stood up to white authority and spoke out forcefully against racism. He proved it before the Athletic Commission in Illinois and in the ring against Patterson. As Eldridge Cleaver wrote in his 1968 autobiography *Soul on Ice*: "If the Bay of Pigs can be seen as a straight right hand to the psychological jaw of white America then [Ali/Patterson] was the perfect left hook to the gut." One sign of Ali's growing impact: in 1965, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Lowndes, Alabama, chose the symbol of a black panther for its logo and attached to it a slogan inspired by the champ, "WE Are the Greatest." Suddenly, a blast of ego became a call to arms. Huey Newton, the cofounder of the Black Panthers, said that while he had no interest in God or Allah, the speeches of Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali were crucial in the process of his politicization.

Ali described his growing cultural influence in a 1970 interview in the *Black Scholar*: "I was determined to be the one nigger the white man didn't get. Go on and join something. If it isn't the Muslims, at least join the Black Panthers. Join something bad."

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The Terrell fight fell apart. Ali had to choose a new opponent in a hurry. In the two years since he'd become champ, he'd only fought twice. It was time to make money, to cash in as quickly and as often as possible, especially given that the U.S. Army wanted to put him in uniform and out of work. But now Ali's team had to scrounge for a deal. After being rejected by Illinois and warned by several other locales that he was unwelcome, Ali and his managers turned to Canada, announcing a fight against George Chuvalo on March 29 at the Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto.

Being forced to leave his own country filled Ali, once again, with a sense of his own importance. "It doesn't look right to the free world, the way I'm being treated," he said. "This all makes me bigger. I always knew I was meant for something. It's taking shape, a destiny. To be great you must suffer, you must pay the price."

Members of the Louisville Sponsoring Group tried to persuade Ali to compromise on his military service. They called in favors and received assurances from powerful men in government that if Ali agreed to serve his country, he would be assigned a role that kept him far from combat. In all likelihood, he would perform a series of boxing exhibitions for soldiers just as Joe Louis had done during World War II. Gordon Davidson, representing the group, flew to New York to make the pitch to Ali. Davidson believed that Ali was a fine young man but very impressionable. "Elijah Muhammad pumped a lot of poison into him," Davidson said. "Ali didn't believe all that." The lawyer hoped to impress upon the boxer how much he would lose by refusing the draft. He found Ali in a suite at the Sheraton Hotel in Manhattan, surrounded by about a dozen Muslims, all of them dressed in black suits. "I had on my desk contracts worth more than \$1 million from various companies, including Coca-Cola," Davidson said. "I told him, 'You know, they're all going to go *whoosh*, out the window.'"

But Ali would not be moved.

"The conversation lasted two hours," Davidson recounted. "And at the end he said, 'I want to thank you because I know you had my best interests at heart.' He was very gracious and appreciative."

Chuvalo was one of those fighters, like Rocky Marciano, fueled by pride and guts, a tough guy who didn't mind taking a punch for every one he gave. For Arum, who was promoting the fight and using his personal credit card to

cover his expenses, it was not an easy event to sell. Chuvalo's size and battered face would give even the toughest man pause in a bar fight, but the Canadian was considered no match for Ali. In an attempt to raise interest in the lackluster match, Ali called it an international battle pitting Canada's champ against America's and did his best to make it sound as if he were worried about losing. As a "warrior on the battleground of freedom," Ali said, he had been too busy in recent months to train properly. When one of Ali's sparring partners, Jimmy Ellis, knocked him down during a practice session, sports-writers concluded the champ was telling the truth.

Chuvalo was twenty-eight years old, with a record of thirty-four wins, eleven losses, and two draws, but he was big and strong, and he'd never been knocked out. In the pre-fight media flurry, Chuvalo promised he would not go down easily, as Liston had. "Hell, my kid could've taken a better punch than that," he said, referring to the so-called phantom punch thrown in Lewiston, Maine. A journalist asked if Chuvalo meant his eldest son, who was six years old. "No, no," Chuvalo corrected. "I mean Jesse, the youngest. He's two. It would be an insult to the oldest to say he can't take a harder shot than Liston did."

The bell rang. Ali jabbed. Chuvalo let him. Every time Ali stopped jabbing, Chuvalo moved inside and pounded Ali's ribcage. At one point in the opening round, Chuvalo banged fourteen consecutive rights to the same spot on Ali's left side before Ali moved away and hit back.

"Harder! Harder!" Ali said.

In the second round, Ali raised his hands and stood still, inviting Chuvalo to hit him in the stomach again. Chuvalo obliged.

"It's the chance of a lifetime for Chuvalo," the ringside announcer said. Chuvalo outpunched Ali in the first four rounds, 120 to 92. That was startling enough. But even more important was Chuvalo's advantage in power punches. Ali landed only 30 of them in the first four rounds; Chuvalo landed 107.

Chuvalo exposed the weaknesses that legendary trainer Eddie Futch had spotted in Ali. The champ didn't have a great knockout punch, and he never worked the opponent's body, Futch said. And Ali's defense, the trainer said, was "monolithic," relying almost entirely on his ability to back away from punches rather than ducking or deflecting them. Ali made up for it, Futch said, with "his speed and his good reflexes and his big heart." Big heart, in

boxing language, meant the ability to remain conscious while getting batted about the head. Ali and Chuvalo both had plenty of heart.

More than any man Ali had ever faced, Chuvalo forced the champ to fight all out, to abandon gimmicks and draw on the full extent of his talent, mixing jabs and hooks, punching until his arms grew weary and his hands sore.

In his first fight against Liston, Ali had landed 95 punches. In the rematch, he had needed only 4 punches. Against Patterson, he had landed 210 blows over twelve rounds. Now, against Chuvalo, Ali would land 474 punches while absorbing 335 — including more than 300 power punches. It was the heaviest beating Ali had ever taken. "In my own mind," Chuvalo once said, "I was, like, special . . . I always said to myself that I couldn't be hurt. I felt, a crazy part of me felt, indestructible." After the fourth round, Ali may have begun to sense that Chuvalo was indeed indestructible, or that he at least believed in his own indestructibility. Ali said after the fight that Chuvalo's head was "the hardest thing I've ever punched."

Pacing himself, Ali circled the ring. He fought like a man who expected a long night and recognized that the judges — not a cut to the head and not a knockout blow — would likely decide the outcome. Chuvalo more than any other fighter to that point had revealed how Ali might be beaten: plan for a long night of work, stay inside, work the body, and keep pounding. He gave Ali a vicious beating, forcing him to go fifteen rounds for the first time. But the judges, in a unanimous decision, named Ali the winner.

Chuvalo finished the night with a lumpy face yet an unbroken spirit. He noted years later that Ali had to go to the hospital after the fight because he was "pissing blood" from so many kidney shots.

"Me?" Chuvalo said. "I got to go dancing with my wife."

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"What's My Name?"

At the moment when Ali should have been the king of boxing and the undisputed champion of sports commerce, he was so unpopular that he couldn't get a fight in the United States. One after another, politicians proved their patriotism by banning Ali from their provinces. Even Louisville refused him.

The Chuvalo fight, while entertaining enough, did not provide a windfall. The arena had sold out, but closed-circuit ticket sales were scant, in part because the fight had been arranged on short notice and in part because fans had not expected much from Chuvalo. Ali understood that his career might be halted at any moment if the army forced him to enlist. Meanwhile, he was broke. He had fifty thousand dollars socked away in the trust fund that the Louisville Sponsoring Group had all but forced upon him, and that was all. So Ali did what Ali did best. He fought. Over the next twelve months, he would defend his heavyweight title six times. Not since the heyday of Joe Louis in 1941 had a champion fought so often.

"I am a fighter, and a fighter's years in business are not very long," he said. "So I stay in action, stay alert, stay on target. And because I can go into the ring and come out again without being hurt, I can afford to keep going, doing twice the amount of work other champions have done, because it takes less out of me." Or, as Herbert Muhammad put it: "Standard Oil doesn't try to sell a small amount of oil each year."

In those six fights, though his opponents were not uniformly top-rate, Ali

lived up to his braggadocio. No one knew, of course, that they were seeing the boxer in his prime for the last time.

On May 21, 1966, before 46,000 people at the Arsenal Football Stadium in England, Ali fought Henry Cooper again. Starting slowly, Ali waltzed around the ring, throwing insignificant punches here and there, like a man bothered by a fly in the room. At last, in the fourth, he attacked, and from that point on he hit Cooper wherever and whenever he wanted. In the sixth, an Ali right ruptured the skin over Cooper's left eye—a cut that would require sixteen stitches to close—and the referee stepped in to stop a contest that was never much of one.

Less than three months later, once again in England, Ali needed only three rounds to knock out Brian London. In this fight, anyway, he proved that he really could go into the ring and come out un hurt. London landed only seven punches.

For his next fight, in Frankfurt, West Germany, against Karl Mildener, Ali did not have the company of his brother, who had recently gotten married. Ali's parents tagged along instead. Three hours after taking off from Chicago, the champ was asleep when Odessa, the only woman in the traveling group, awakened her son with kisses on the forehead.

"Is my baby okay?" she cooed.

"Yes, Mama, I'm fine," he softly replied. "I'll bet you're nervous, huh, Mom—35,000 feet up?"

"No, baby," she said. "As long as I'm with you, Mama's fine."

Mildener was a tough, experienced fighter, with a record of forty-nine wins, two losses, and three draws. He was also a lefty, a species that had given Ali trouble since his earliest days as an amateur.

Sure enough, Ali struggled. He couldn't jab as often as he liked. When he threw hooks, Mildener ducked them with ease. Only a quarter of Ali's punches were landing. Usually, he landed better than one in three. With each passing round, the crowd of more than fifty thousand at Frankfurt's Waldstadion cheered more loudly for the ten-to-one underdog Mildener. It was the first heavyweight championship fight ever held in Germany. Still, Mildener was more nuisance than hazard, like a developing nation trying to make the threats of a superpower. In the eighth round, Ali seemed to decide enough was enough and took control. An Ali right buckled the German's

knees. As Mildenberger teetered, Ali shoved him to the canvas. Mildenberger got up, but Ali dropped him again in the tenth. By now the challenger was a bleeding mess. Finally, in the twelfth, another straight right by Ali left Mildenberger dazed and helpless, and the referee stopped the fight.

The Mildenberger bout was Ali's last under the Louisville Sponsoring Group. On October 22, as the business relationship ended, members of the group received a summary of their investment in the boxer. It showed total income of \$2.37 million, with \$1.36 million of that, or about 58 percent, having gone to Ali. After expenses, the group's net profit amounted to about \$200,000, to be divided thirteen ways. Ali had paid back his loans to the group, he had paid his taxes, and he had about \$75,000 in a trust fund. Though the boxer had not taken good care of his money, and though the members of the Louisville Group had not seen much of a return on their investment, the businessmen felt satisfied. They'd helped guide the young boxer's career as he rose to become champion and helped him earn a great fortune. From 1964 to 1966, Ali had earned more than \$1.2 million. Baseball's highest paid player during those same years was Willie Mays, who had earned only about \$100,000 a year. Even adjusting for inflation, Ali was almost certainly the best-paid athlete in American history up to that point, and by a wide margin. Unfortunately, he had burned through his money quickly. He still had his trust fund, but that was about the extent of his savings. At one point in 1966, his personal bank account showed a balance of \$109.

Gordon Davidson said the Louisville Sponsoring Group's primary goal had been to help Ali become champion. They had not only managed his career and his money well; they had also stuck with him when he joined the Nation of Islam. Ali appreciated it. At a boxing exhibition in Louisville near the end of his contract, he asked the members of the group to step into the ring so that he could thank them publicly. All things considered, Davidson said, the members of the group would look back on their time with Ali with enormous pride. They helped launch one of the greatest careers in American athletic history, he said, and "we also showed young men they can reach the top in the fight game without selling their souls."

Before his next fight at age twenty-four, Ali spoke of retirement. His back ached. His hands hurt. Cleveland "Big Cat" Williams would be his next op-

ponent, he said, and probably one of his last. This time, Ali found a venue in the United States willing to let him fight. The bout would be held in America's newest temple of sport, Houston's Astrodome, the nation's first indoor stadium, then called the "Eighth Wonder of the World." Money would pour in not only from ticket sales but also, once again, from closed-circuit TV broadcasts in nearly fifty countries. The match would air on live TV in Mexico and Canada. Ali said he wanted to fight Williams, then Ernie Terrell, and then retire "with money in the bank."

Ali called Williams his "most dangerous opponent," and there was a time when that might have been true, but two years earlier Williams had been shot in the stomach by a .357 magnum bullet from a police officer's gun, and it had taken four operations to save his life. He hadn't been the same since.

More than 35,000 spectators filled the Astrodome for the fight, which turned out to be entirely one-sided. In the first round, Ali scored almost at will, moving fast around the ring, throwing jabs, hooks, and four-punch combinations. In the second round, Ali found an even easier target in the plodding big man. Ali's fists circled and sliced, furling lines in countless new ways, each line ending abruptly on Williams's chin. A spectator who had never boxed might think Ali was feeling good in the ring, like an artist in the moment of soulful expression, but for an athlete, unfortunately, that's not how it works. Boxing tortures the nerves. Ali said it many times: boxing was his job, not a means of expression. If he took the time to think about how he felt, if he allowed his concentration to flag for a moment, he might have found himself flat on the floor, staring up at the lights, felled by a single punch. Ali would appreciate his brilliance later, watching his fights on film, but never in the ring. In the ring, he was all energy and improvisation and fury, a warrior, not an artist.

With a left-right combination, Ali sent Williams to the canvas. Then he did it again. When Williams got up the second time, blood streamed from his nose and mouth. Ali moved in relentlessly and knocked him to the floor once more. This time Williams was saved by the bell. In most fights, the referee will declare a knockout if a fighter falls three times in a round, but this was a championship bout, so the rule had been waived. As Williams rose unsteadily from his stool to begin another round, Ali raked his opponent's face with more punches. More blood drizzled to the floor. Down went Williams.

One last time the wounded fighter struggled to his feet, "manfully and uselessly," as *Sports Illustrated* noted, but Ali piled punches upon punches until the referee stopped the fight.

Boxing writers and former boxers continued to criticize Ali's unorthodox boxing style and to question his toughness. "Trouble with Clay, he thinks he knows it all," Joe Louis wrote in *The Ring* magazine. "He won't listen... With room to move, Clay's a champion, real dangerous. But he doesn't know a thing about fighting on the ropes, which is where he would be if he were in there with me." Still, Ali was winning, and winning impressively. Even grizzled boxing veterans admitted that the champion's performance against Williams had been extraordinary; seldom had one fighter inflicted so much damage while suffering so little. No one knew if Ali had been serious about retirement, but had he truly intended to quit boxing, this would have been a fine moment for it. He was one of the most handsome and handsomely paid men on the planet. He was largely undamaged by a sport that crippled and stupefied even its best practitioners. And he had just given a brilliant performance in front of one of the largest audiences to ever witness a sporting event. Had he quit then, it might have been enough to go down in history as one of the greatest boxers of all time.

But three months later, he fought again. Once more, it was in the wondrous Astrodome, this time against Ernie Terrell. No animosity brewed between Ali and Terrell before the fight. In fact, Ali seemed to like Ernie, who had grown up in Mississippi. Like Ali, Terrell entertained notions of having a career as a singer and made recordings with a group he called Ernie Terrell and the Heavyweights. Both men had fought as light-heavyweights in the Golden Gloves and both lived on Chicago's South Side, although Ali had been spending so much time in Houston of late that he had begun calling Texas his home.

On December 28, 1966, the boxers were in New York promoting their match. Terrell, a tall, lean, soft-spoken man, was telling reporters that he'd been waiting years to face Ali, who he continued to refer to as Cassius Clay. Terrell said they'd fought and defeated many of the same men, including Cleveland Williams, George Chuvalo, and Doug Jones. While many state boxing commissions continued to recognize Ali as the heavyweight champ, and while most sports fans did the same, the World Boxing Association had vacated Ali's title to register its unhappiness with his political views. At least

according to the WBA, the title belonged to Terrell. But Terrell knew that he needed to defeat Ali to stake a legitimate claim to the championship.

The boxers were in a small room talking to Howard Cosell of WABC-TV, jawing at each other in the way fighters often did while trying to hype a bout, inflating their chests and their egos, when Ali complained, "Why you want to say 'Cassius Clay' when Howard Cosell and everybody is calling me Muhammad Ali?" He continued, "My name is Muhammad Ali and you will announce it right there in the center of the ring after the fight if you don't do it now... You just acting like a old Uncle Tom, another Floyd Patterson. I'm gonna punish you!"

At the mention of "old Uncle Tom," Terrell turned to Ali, leaned in, and said, "Don't call me no Uncle Tom."

"That's what you are," Ali said. "Just back off of me, Uncle Tom!"

The men shoved at one another. Ali slapped Terrell in the face.

"Keep shooting," Cosell told his cameraman.

No doubt Ali was looking to irritate Terrell and to promote their fight, but he also had a legitimate and sincere gripe. People changed their names all the time — sometimes to hide their religion, sometimes to accentuate it. Few were the people who insisted on referring to Tony Curtis as Bernard Schwartz or Marilyn Monroe as Norma Jean Baker or Mother Teresa as Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu. Yet every major American newspaper continued referring to Muhammad Ali as Cassius Clay. So did Sonny Liston and Floyd Patterson. So did most of the fans approaching him for autographs. In the *New York Times* article reporting on the tiff between the two boxers, the headline referred to Muhammad Ali while the body of the story continued to call him Cassius Clay. Cosell was one of the few journalists consistently calling him Ali in December 1966.

Terrell was no Uncle Tom, and he had expressed no objection to Ali's faith. He had never said, as Floyd Patterson had, that Ali's religion was inferior to Christianity. In fact, Terrell told another reporter: "I got nothing against him or his religion." He went on to say he knew that Ali was only trying to rattle him, and maybe he was trying to rattle Ali in return. "He wants me to worry about what people think about me, wants to confuse the issue," Terrell said. "But it's dangerous to be distracted. I'll just concentrate more."

Leading up to the fight, Ali vowed to punish Terrell for disrespecting his faith and his new name. "I want to torture him," he said. "I want to give him

the Patterson humiliation and punish him. A clean knockout is too good for him."

Ali did punish him, but not right away. The fighters exchanged punches evenly in the first two rounds, before Ali began to land his jabs effectively. Just as they had after the Patterson fight, reporters accused Ali of carrying Terrell, of making him suffer through a long night when he could have finished him off sooner. But there's little evidence to suggest that was true. In the seventh round, Ali spun Terrell around with a punch, shoved him into the ropes, and then unleashed a furious series of blows, lifting both feet off the mat to put all his body weight into the punches, clearly going for the knockout. Terrell's legs wobbled and both eyes bled, but the challenger gathered himself and fought back, hammering hard on Ali's head in the final minute of the round. It happened again and again. Every time Ali took control of the fight, Terrell fought back, even as his left eye puffed and closed.

"What's my name?" Ali taunted in the eighth, followed by a whistling left-right combination that made the question rhetorical. "What's my name?" he spat again through his mouthpiece. Terrell closed his eyes as the next combination flew.

When the bell clanged to end the round, Ali did not go to his corner. Instead, he stepped in close to Terrell. His eyes went wide. The tendons in his neck tightened. His arms fell to his sides and he leaned in. He barked it this time so it didn't sound like a question: "What's my name!"

The fight went on for seven more rounds, but not because Ali wanted it to; he tried and couldn't end it. In round twelve, Ali stood flat-footed and threw his biggest punches. Terrell took the blows and fought back. Ali threw 737 punches in the fight, almost all of them to Terrell's head. But Terrell's long jab kept Ali at a distance much of the time, and Ali, looking weary, couldn't land a big enough punch to put Terrell away. He stopped taunting.

When it was over and the judges unanimously named Ali the winner, announcer Howard Cosell got in the ring and asked Ali if he could have knocked out Terrell if he had wanted to.

"No, I don't believe I could've," Ali said. "After the eighth round I laid on him, but I found myself tiring."

It didn't matter to the white men covering the bout, who by now looked for any and every reason to criticize Ali. They said he lacked dignity. They called it "a disgusting exhibition of calculated cruelty," as if boxing were supposed

to be anything else. Milton Gross said he almost yearned for a return to the days when the mafia controlled the sport. Arthur Daley called Ali "a mean and malicious man," and Jimmy Cannon, of all people, called Ali's treatment of Terrell "a kind of a lynching."

Ali had boxed beautifully, changing speed and direction like a kite, cracking jabs, digging hooks to the ribs, sliding away with a shuffle to survey the damage, and then cracking more jabs, moving in and out with no steady rhythm, no pattern. He was a revolutionary, like Charlie Parker, with an innate style and virtuosity no one would ever reproduce. He turned violence into craft like no heavyweight before or since.

But that doesn't mean boxing's inherent violence passed him over. Even in a relatively easy win, Ali took about eighty punches to the head and sixty to the body from a man who stood six-foot-six-inches tall and weighed 212½ pounds and never quit. If that made Ali a torturer or a thug, it made him a bad one.

23

"Against the Furies"

In 1967, Muhammad Ali was twenty-five years old, the world's heavyweight champion, the most widely recognized athlete on earth, the most prominent Muslim in America, and the most visible opponent of the war in Vietnam. He remained obsessed with cars and houses and money, and he was eager to find a new wife, but the thing he talked about most of all was race. Race was the live wire that ran through him.

"A house is on fire, pretend," he told Jack Olsen, a white reporter for *Sports Illustrated*. "You're sleeping next to your partner." Ali made the sound of snoring. "You open one eye and you see the house is on fire. Your partner's still sleeping." He added whistles to the snoring sounds. "And you see this hot lava and this burning two-by-four is getting ready to fall on your partner, and you get out of the bed. You run out of the house without waking him up! When you get outside, you say [he clasped his hands and looked to the sky], 'Oh, Lord, what have I done wrong? I was so selfish and greedy, worrying about myself until I left my partner inside. Oh, [wringing hands], he's probably dead, the house caved in.'"

He paused dramatically.

"And then he comes out just in time and he looks in your face! Right then you feel he's supposed to kill you. You know what you'd do if somebody left you in a burning house . . . And he says, 'Man, why didn't you wake me up? Why did you let me stay in that house? [Shouting] The house was on fire! Man, you were gonna let me burn . . .!'

"Well, that's what white Americans are like. The house's been on fire for

310 years, and the whites have let the blacks sleep. The Negro's been lynched, killed, raped, burned, dragged around all through the city hanging on the chains of cars, alcohol and turpentine poured into his wounds. That's why Negroes are so full of fear today. Been put into him from the time he's a baby. Imagine! Twenty-two million Negroes in America, suffering, fought in the wars, got more worse treatment than any human being can even imagine, walking the streets of America . . . hungry with no food to eat, walk the streets with no shoes on, existing on relief, living in charity and poorhouses, 22 million people who faithfully served America and who have worked and who still loves his enemy are still dogged and kicked around."

The words were powerful and prescient. But, at the same time, Ali's views could be slippery, even incongruous. That didn't make him unusual. What made him unusual is that so many people were listening. Reporters wrote down his remarks. Elijah Muhammad's followers heard him lecture several times a month at mosques around the country. FBI informants made notes and sent memos to the home office in Washington, DC.

"If total integration would make them happy, the whites as well as the blacks, I would totally integrate," he told one journalist. "If total separation, every man with his own, would make them happy, I'll do that. Whatever it takes to make people happy, where they won't be shooting and hiding in the bushes and blowing each other up and killing each other, rioting. But I don't think total integration can work."

Boxers are professional rebels. They are permitted to engage in violence that others are not. They are permitted to be uncivil. Ali merely extended it beyond the ring. He wanted to make everything he said and everything he did a protest. He declared every chance he got that he was not going to be tamed. He would fight, stand up, say it, do it, right away, every time. He would be the world's heavyweight rebel champion. He was living a life of superficiality, as most of us do, making a career as an entertainer, blowing his money on more cars than he could possibly drive, and yet an overriding spirit of rebellion guided him and perhaps redeemed him. That's why his refusal to accept the draft captured so much attention and stirred such anger, because everything about Ali's existence offended the majority of white Americans: his skin color, his loud mouth, his religion, and, now, his lack of patriotism. For the first time in almost forty years, *The Ring* magazine, the fight game's bible, declined to name a "Fighter of the Year," insisting that Ali

(still referred to as Cassius Clay by the magazine) was "not to be held up as an example to the youngsters of the United States."

The criticism never bothered Ali, perhaps because he had little confidence in America to do right by him. The problem went back to slavery, he said: "Well, we weren't brought here to be citizens in white America. The intention was for us to work for them — and like it. They mated us up, the more the merrier. The big black slave was called the buck. 'This nigger slave can breed fifteen babies a month!' And as soon as the baby was born, it was separated from the mother. And that was the making of your 'negro.' He was a mental slave. And that's the people we still have in America today." Given all that, he asked, how could the black man in America ever expect to be treated fairly? "When you put your whole trust and your whole future in another people, then you're putting yourself in a position to be disappointed and deceived. You cannot disappoint me. You cannot deceive me if I'm not looking for anything from you."

Ali voiced plainly and simply what so many black Americans felt: that they would never get a fair deal because a fair deal wasn't possible under the longstanding conditions imposed on them. Even black Americans who cared little for boxing and knew nothing of the law had the overriding sense that Ali had been the victim of prejudice. But it was his response, not his victimhood, that made him a hero. It was his refusal to back down as the government and boxing officials threatened to punish him. "Six-foot-two and a half and 220 pounds, as pretty as a man could be, Muhammad Ali was a black hero in an American landscape that nourished few black heroes," journalist Jill Nelson wrote. "Articulate, funny, incredibly male, Ali took no shit from the white man and lived to tell the tale, the man of black women's collective dreams."

Ali's stand against Vietnam made him a symbol of protest against a war in which black men were dying at a wildly disproportionate rate. Black men accounted for 22 percent of all battlefield deaths when the black population in America was only 10 percent. Why was America spending money and tossing away lives in the name of freedom in a distant land while resisting the cause of freedom at home? Why, yet again, did the interests of black Americans seem to diverge from the interests of the nation as a whole? Ali raised these troubling questions as opposition to the war rapidly spread.

Martin Luther King Jr. had begun speaking out against America's involvement in Vietnam, although board members at the Southern Christian Lead-

ership Conference (SCLC) were concerned that King would only serve to enrage President Johnson and set back the civil rights movement. King was contemplating a dramatic change in direction for the SCLC. After his failed campaign against segregated housing in Chicago in 1966 and after horrific riots in Detroit and Newark in the summer of 1967, the civil rights leader said American society could only be saved with "radical moral surgery." If something wasn't done quickly — to stop the war, combat discrimination, and end the government's oppression of the poor — King feared an all-out race war that would end with a right-wing, fascist police state in America. King intended to lead a more radical movement, and his opposition to the war in Vietnam would be one of its pillars.

Andrew Young Jr., executive director of the SCLC, said Ali's stance may have played a part in King's decision to publicly oppose the war. "It was about the same time that Muhammad declared he was a conscientious objector that Martin began to say, 'I can't segregate my conscience,'" Young recalled. "There's no question in my mind there was a subtle influence that connected the two of them in terms of conscience and the war in Vietnam."

In an editorial, the *New York Times* said the boxer "may become a new symbol and rallying point for opposition to the draft and the Vietnam war. In Harlem, the nation's largest Negro ghetto, there were indications . . . that Clay's refusal to be drafted was creating considerable emotional impact, particularly on the young."

Tom Wicker of the *Times* wondered what would happen if thousands of Americans followed Ali's lead and refused to fight. "The fact is," Wicker wrote, "that he is taking the ultimate position of civil disobedience; he is refusing to obey the law of the majority on the grounds of his personal beliefs, with full knowledge of the consequence . . . What would happen if all young men of draft age took the same position!" An answer to the question came from L. Mendel Rivers, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who said that if Ali, "that great theologian of Black Muslim power," won a deferment, the president's power to deploy the military would be undercut by a flood of double-talking conscientious objectors. U.S. Congressman Robert H. Michel of Illinois also condemned Ali, saying, "While thousands of our finest young men are fighting and dying in the jungles of Vietnam, this healthy specimen is profiteering from a series of shabby bouts. Apparently Cassius will fight anyone but the Viet Cong." Michel went on to say that while

Ali considered himself "the greatest, . . . I am sure history will look upon him as the least of all the men who have held the once-honorable title of Heavyweight Champion of the World."

Draft board officials worried too, saying Ali was making it difficult for them to do their jobs. One of them, Allen J. Rhorer, chairman of the draft board in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana, wrote to the U.S. attorney general, Ramsey Clark, saying the members of his board would "seriously consider submitting their resignations" unless "prompt and vigorous action" were taken against Ali.

Ali claimed he was a Muslim minister, saying he spent 90 percent of his time preaching and 10 percent boxing. But Ali never held the formal title of minister or any other title within the Nation of Islam. In fact, Elijah Muhammad stated clearly that Ali was not a minister, according to an FBI memo dated March 17, 1966, and made public half a century later. According to the memo, Elijah told another member of the Nation of Islam that Ali was welcome to attend an upcoming Nation of Islam event, but he should not receive any special treatment or honors. "He can come," Elijah said. "That's up to him. Nobody barring him from the meeting. He won't be up on the speakers stand. He's no minister. . . . He won't speak unless I ask him to say something and I will tell him what to say."

Nevertheless, Ali continued to call himself a minister, and officials in the Nation of Islam never publicly contradicted him. The FBI, in its memo, speculated that Elijah Muhammad allowed Ali to describe himself as a minister "because of his publicity value." The Nation also helped Ali find a lawyer, Hayden C. Covington of New York, who had successfully defended members of the Jehovah's Witnesses against draft-evasion charges. Covington and the Nation secured signed statements from nearly four thousand people — most of them members of the Nation of Islam — affirming that Ali was a full-time minister. The lawyer also asked Angelo Dundee to sign a statement confirming that boxing was merely Ali's "side line or avocation" and that preaching was his "main job or vocation." In a letter to Ali, Covington wrote, "I told the Honorable Elijah Muhammad that we will fight them until hell freezes over and in the end skate on the ice of victory."

The first judge who heard Ali's case sustained his claim as a conscientious objector. But the Justice Department's appeals board, perhaps fearing the kind of chain reaction the *New York Times's* Tom Wicker had warned about,

rejected the judge's recommendation, saying Ali's objections to military service were based on issues of politics and race, not on a moral objection to all war. Ali would have to serve or go to jail, the board ruled. In March, he received an order to report the following month for induction at a draft board office in Houston.

While his lawyers scrambled, Ali prepared for the kind of fight he knew how to win. On March 22, 1967, after minimal training, he took on Zora Foley in Madison Square Garden. Foley was almost thirty-six years old, with a record of seventy-four wins, seven losses, and four draws, a father of eight, a combat veteran of the Korean War, and one of the kindest, gentlest men in boxing. Even Ali couldn't find reason to get angry with Foley. Moments before the fight, Ali was asked what he would do if he lost. He answered without hesitation: "Retire. Tonight."

When the fight began, Ali seemed uninterested, like a man too bored by his dinner guest to bother making conversation. He landed only two punches in the first round, three in the second, and six in the third. He bounced around the ring as if his only goal were to burn calories. Foley landed a few good shots but hardly enough to bother Ali.

In the fourth, Ali delivered a jolt of excitement with a knockdown. But Foley rose from the canvas before the referee counted ten and hit back, landing his best punches of the fight. In the fifth, Ali poked steady, painful jabs. In the sixth, he did more of the same. The seventh was different, though. Ali was no longer bored. He advanced on Foley. He threw big right hands and left hooks, not jabs. That left him vulnerable, and Foley retaliated with his best punches of the night. Ali accepted the punishment as the cost of doing business and stepped in again. Midway through the round, Ali rotated his torso and wound up for a big right hand that caught Foley flush on the left cheek. Ali wound up again, threw the same punch, connected with the same spot on Foley's cheek, and watched as the veteran fighter fell flat on his face, collapsed with his arms by his sides like a sidewalk drunk.

When the television announcer found Ali, the champ had his brother on one side, Herbert Muhammad on the other, and his father behind him. Ali smiled: "First of all I would like to say *As-Salaam-Alaikum* to our dear beloved leader and teacher the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and I'm feeling real fine tonight. I thank him for his blessings and prayers."

"Now, let's talk about the fight," said the announcer.

They did. Ali, as was custom, said he had never been hurt. He described the knockout punch and then he invited his father to get in front of the camera. "I would say he's the greatest of all time," a beaming, slick-haired Cash Clay said. "I'm not saying that because he's my son."

After he pried himself off the floor and regained his senses, Zora Folley, a more impartial judge, came to the same conclusion as Cash Clay. "He's smart," Folley said. "The trickiest fighter I've seen. He's had twenty-nine fights and acts like he's had a hundred. He could write the book on boxing, and anyone that fights him should be made to read it first." He continued, "There's just no way to train yourself for what he does. The moves, the speed, the punches, and the way he changes style every time you think you got him figured . . . This guy has a style all of his own. It's far ahead of any fighter's around today, so how could those old-time fighters, you know, Dempsey, Tunney or any of them keep up? Louis wouldn't have a chance — he was too slow. Marciano couldn't get to him, and would never get away from Ali's jab."

Finally, Ali was getting the respect he'd been saying he deserved since he was twelve years old. What's more, there were few opponents likely to challenge him. There was talk of a Chuvalo or Patterson rematch. And there was a young fighter named Joe Frazier, winner of the 1964 Olympic gold medal and undefeated through his first fourteen fights, looming on the horizon. But at that moment it was difficult to imagine anyone beating Ali.

His biggest threat was jail.

"I've left the sports pages," he said. "I've gone onto the front pages. I want to know what is right, what'll look good in history. I'm being tested by Allah. I'm giving up my title, my wealth, maybe my future. Many great men have been tested for their religious belief. If I pass this test, I'll come out stronger than ever . . . All I want is justice. Will I have to get that from history?"

PART II

Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Louisville on March 28, 1967, just as Ali returned to his hometown after defeating Zora Folley. According to an FBI memo marked "secret," Ali and King met privately at King's hotel for about thirty minutes, and their time together "mainly consisted of joking and 'horse play'."

When they finished, the men met with reporters.

"We're all black brothers," said Ali, who stood almost a full head taller than King. Both men wore suits and ties. "We use different approaches to our everyday problems, but the same dog that bit him bit me. When we go out, they don't ask if you are a Christian, a Catholic, a Baptist, or a Muslim. They just start whupping black heads."

"Yes, oh, yes," King chorused. "We discussed our common problems and our common concerns. We are victims of the same system of oppression. Although our religious beliefs differ, we are still brothers."

The FBI may have been right that the meeting between Ali and King consisted largely of jokes. Both men were great comics. Both knew how to establish emotional connections quickly, even with their critics. Both possessed a manic energy at times. But despite the joking, the meeting mattered. For one thing, it revealed King's continued willingness to stand publicly as an opponent of the war in Vietnam. It also served as a reminder of Ali's flexible ideology and his seemingly contradictory urges to rebel and make friends.

Finally, the meeting reflected the manner in which the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement were colliding.

On the same day he met King, Ali, dressed in an iridescent blue-green suit, appeared at a protest against segregated housing in Louisville. His remarks were not entirely in favor of integration, but he nonetheless spoke and lent his support. He wanted to be heard. He wanted to stand with black people. He wanted everyone to know he fought on the side of change.

"Check me out on this," he told the housing protesters, as he launched into a variation on some of the speeches he'd heard at Nation of Islam rallies. "The richest soil is the black soil. You want a strong cup of coffee, you say, 'I want it black.' The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice." He went on to say black was not only beautiful, it was better off without white. That brought shouts of "No!" from audience members who, after all, had gathered for the purpose of integrating Louisville's housing supply. But Ali continued, "Let's quit worrying white people and forcing ourselves into their neighborhoods," he said. "Let's start cleaning up and do for ourselves. I am what they call a Muslim. I am a follower of another freedom fighter—his name is Elijah Muhammad." Again, the crowd expressed some disdain. Ali said black Christians had been deceived all their lives. "When we went to church we looked in the Bible . . . We saw Jesus. He's white. We see angels. They're white. You see pictures of the Last Supper. Everybody there is white. The president lives in the White House." On the other hand, he said, "Devil food cake is dark. Black cats are bad luck." He continued to insult his audience. "I realize this here's a small town and you're not too wise to these teachings . . . I say the solutions to our problems is getting together, cleaning ourselves up, and respecting our women. Then the whole world will respect us as a nation."

He went on to talk about his opposition to the war, making his most plainly political statement on the subject to date: "Why should they ask me, another so-called Negro, to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?" He went on to say that his real enemies were in the United States, and that he would not help the United States enslave others.

The audience members did not boo when he was done, but neither did they wildly applaud. Clearly, this was not what they had come to hear.

When Ali finished, a reporter asked him how he thought the audience felt about his sermon.

"Oh, they liked it," he said.

A few days later, Dr. King, speaking at New York's Riverside Church, made his most powerful statement to date about Vietnam, calling the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and saying he felt compelled to speak out as a "brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam" and on behalf of "the poor in America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes of home, and dealt death and corruption in Vietnam." The reverend was attacked from almost all sides for his remarks—branded unpatriotic, a communist sympathizer, and, in the words of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, "an instrument in the hands of subversive forces seeking to undermine our nation." Meanwhile, antiwar demonstrations around the nation grew larger and louder.

On April 17, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected a request by Ali's lawyers for an injunction that would have blocked the boxer's military induction. The lawyers had argued that the Kentucky Selective Service had discriminated against the boxer because of his race. Faced with the disappointing news, Ali promised that he would appear at his scheduled induction ceremony on April 28, but he insisted he would not accept induction. He vowed to "stand up for my religious beliefs even if it means I am put in jail for fifty years or am stood up in front of a machine gun."

In Chicago, Ali conferred with Elijah Muhammad and Herbert Muhammad. Elijah told reporters he offered no advice to his disciple. Perhaps tellingly, though, he added, "I gave him no more advice than I gave the faithful ones who followed me to the penitentiary in 1942."

It was a cool, gray morning in Houston, a curtain of mist in the air. On the morning of his scheduled military induction, Muhammad Ali gazed at himself in the reflection of a coffee-shop mirror as he jabbed with his fork at four soft-boiled eggs on his plate. Perhaps he saw a historical figure looking back at him in the mirror. That was the take of a *Sports Illustrated* reporter seated by the boxer's side. In opposing the draft, Ali considered himself a fighter whose battle transcended sports. He was Davey Crockett now. He was John

Henry. Nat Turner. He was a leader of his people. A true believer. Or, as he might have been tempted to say, the greatest crusader of alllll tiiiimes!!

If the government of the United States jailed him or took away his right to fight, "it could cost me \$10 million in earnings," he said to the reporter and to his own reflection. "Does that sound like I'm serious about my religion?"

When they finished their breakfast, Ali and his group of friends, lawyers, and journalists crammed into two taxis for the ride to the Armed Forces Examining and Entrance Station on the third floor of the federal office building at 701 San Jacinto Street. As Ali stepped out of his cab, lights from the TV cameras popped on, brightening the boxer's blue suit. The boxer paused and smiled before entering the building but gave no comment to the press.

Ali was one of twenty-six pre-induction examinees reporting at 8 a.m. to Houston's Board No. 61. He was the only one with a lawyer. Most of the men brought duffel bags or suitcases, knowing that they would likely be leaving on a bus later that day for a military base, but Ali was empty-handed.

"You all look very dejected," he said to some of the other men awaiting induction. He told them jokes. He talked about the Floyd Patterson fight. He said that if he stayed home, the Viet Cong wouldn't get him, but some redneck from Georgia probably would. He signed an autograph for a pre-enlistee from Escondido, California. Another one of the young men awaiting the draft said he wished Ali would go with him to Vietnam because the boxer made for pleasant company and "it would lighten our trip."

Ali's lawyers told him that they planned to take his case to civil court, but they could only do so after they'd exhausted all administrative remedies and after he had formally disobeyed an order to serve. When the moment came, Ali refused to step forward and accept his induction. A Navy lieutenant summoned him to an office and warned that he was committing a felony punishable by five years in prison and a ten-thousand-dollar fine. Ali refused again and signed a paper confirming his stance. With that, he became the most prominent American to make a legal plea for exemption from the war.

When it was over, Ali, for once, had little to say. He read a prepared statement, went back to his room at the Hotel America, and phoned his mother, who had been urging him to accept his induction. By the end of the day, the World Boxing Association and the New York State Athletic Commission had suspended Ali's boxing license and stripped him of his championship title. Soon after, with a unity of spirit, all the other boxing commissions in

the country fell into line. Never mind that they had long tolerated the mafia and professional gamblers in their sport. Never mind that Ali had not yet been convicted of a crime. Never mind that boxing's rules contained no requirement that its champion be a Christian or an American or a supporter of American wars. None of that mattered. Guided by anger, prejudice, or patriotism, boxing's rulers decided that Muhammad Ali was unfit to wear the sport's crown because he was a Muslim who refused to fight for his country.

"The action of the sports authorities could effectively end Clay's career," his hometown newspaper, the *Louisville Courier-Journal* reported.

"Mama, I'm all right," Ali said. "I did what I had to do. I sure am looking forward to coming home to eat some of your cooking."

"Do you know who I am?" Ali asked.

Belinda did not smile or bat her eyelashes. She was tall and slender but no waif. She practiced karate. She stood squarely and confidently. Belinda watched out of the corner of her eye as Ali smiled and eased his way past the waiting customers to order a bowl of soup. When he got to the counter, Belinda addressed him sharply: "You gonna butt the line?"

Ali froze. He went back and waited his turn.

Belinda was the daughter of Raymond and Aminah Boyd of Blue Island, Illinois, a working-class suburb on Chicago's South Side. Having completed her studies at Elijah Muhammad's school for Muslim boys and girls, she was working two jobs, at the bakery and the restaurant. She loved work, loved engaging with customers, loved making money and saving for college. It was true that she'd long had a crush on Ali, and also true that she'd been jealous when she'd heard the boxer had married Sonji Roi. Sonji was the most beautiful woman Belinda had ever seen — a black Elizabeth Taylor, and Ali was her Richard Burton.

Had Sonji and Ali remained married, Belinda said, she would have been content to work hard, help her parents around the house, and live a quiet life of religious observation, following her prince's moves in the pages of *Muhammad Speaks* and on TV. "I wasn't interested in having no boyfriend," she said years later. "I wasn't interested in getting married at all." But after Ali's divorce and after she turned seventeen in the spring of 1967, Belinda's thoughts returned to the man of her dreams. It wasn't his fame or his good looks that appealed to her, she said, so much as his potential as a Muslim. For weeks, Ali visited her at her jobs and called her on the phone. Once, after work, when she was waiting in the rain for a bus to go home, Ali offered to drive her home in his long, silver Eldorado. She refused, saying it wasn't proper for a single girl to be alone with a man in a car. Ali, in his Eldorado, followed Belinda's bus all the way to 150th Street in Blue Island. When Belinda got off the bus, Ali once again offered her a ride. She said she preferred to walk. Ali turned on his car's emergency flashers and drove alongside her, his head out the window, chattering with her, as she completed the last three miles of her journey home.

Later, when Ali visited the house in Blue Island where Belinda lived with her parents, it was as if Sidney Poitier had pulled into the driveway. Neighbor-

25

Faith

His enemy had always been solitude, but now, with no one to box, no reason even to train, with his lawyers handling his fight with the government, and with no crowds clamoring for him, Ali grew bored.

On May 18, 1967, he was pulled over by police in Miami and arrested for driving without a license and failing to appear in court on an earlier traffic violation. He spent about ten minutes in jail before posting bond.

Soon he was back in Chicago, where he visited the Shabazz Restaurant on 71st Street, which sold bean soup and bean pies baked according to the special recipe of Clara Muhammad, the wife of Elijah Muhammad. Ali spotted a familiar face behind the restaurant counter, a seventeen-year-old girl named Belinda Boyd, whom he had met at least once before while visiting the Muhammad University of Islam and whom he had also seen working at one of the Nation of Islam's bakeries. A scarf covered her head and a long dress draped her body. Herbert Muhammad had suggested Ali visit Belinda at the restaurant, suggesting she might make a good wife.

Muhammad Ali was the Nation of Islam's handsome prince. Every girl at Belinda's school loved him. But she loved him more than most. Her love was "exponential," recalled Safiyya Mohammed-Rahmah, Belinda's classmate and the daughter of Herbert Muhammad. She had been proclaiming that love for years. "She just knew she was going to marry him," Safiyya said.

Yet Belinda's knees did not wobble when the prince walked into the restaurant.

bors stepped out of their houses to see him. Here was a girl of seventeen, a girl who had never traveled, a girl with little education beyond that offered by the Nation of Islam, and she found herself suddenly courted by one of the most handsome and famous men in the world, a real-life hero, an older man who had already traveled the planet, already been married, already met important people. He was so big and so good looking, too. She felt giddy in his presence, she said. But she made up her mind not to show it. She had the feeling that Ali, beneath the bluster, was an insecure little boy who wanted to be told what to do. She sensed that she needed to show him strength.

Belinda was a virgin. While they were courting, Ali never pressured her about sex, even as they began to discuss marriage. But one day when Ali was visiting her at home, he asked if he could see her legs. "I wanna see what I'm getting," he said. There was humor, not menace, in the way he asked, but Belinda wasn't laughing.

"You ain't seeing nothing," she said. "You ain't touching nothing. You ain't tasting nothing. You ain't smelling nothing."

Getting involved with a man like Ali, with his mighty ego and matching libido, wasn't easy, especially for a girl so young. But Belinda was no pushover. In her view, Ali had only begun to appreciate the power and beauty of Islam. He had only begun to behave the way a proper Muslim man should. "I wanted to mold him," she said, "so he could be like my father."

Her friend Safiyya had a different perspective, saying Belinda, too, wanted to be molded. Belinda knew everything about Ali. She quoted Ali. She imitated Ali. Although she didn't box, she did practice karate, which may have been her way of trying yet again to be like the champ. "She loved Ali so much," Safiyya said, "she wanted to be Ali."

They were married on August 18, 1967, by a Baptist minister, Dr. Morris H. Tynes, in a ceremony at Ali's home at 8500 South Jeffery Boulevard in Chicago. Ali's parents flew to Chicago for the service but arrived too late, making it in time only for the reception. Herbert Muhammad stood beside Ali as his best man. The wedding, oddly, was a Christian one, as the *Chicago Defender* noted, because "Muslims have no marriage ceremony of their own," although Tynes did include references to Islam in his remarks.

For their honeymoon, the couple traveled to New York City. The trip was a wedding present from Minister Louis X of the Nation of Islam, whose name had recently been changed to Louis Farrakhan.

Belinda was overjoyed, but she was also beginning to see that she and her new husband would not be living like royalty.

It dawned on her only gradually, she said: "I married a man with no job."

While Ali awaited trial on charges of draft evasion, boxing officials began planning for a tournament of televised bouts to decide the next heavyweight champion. Even white sportswriters who had consistently maligned Ali admitted that none of the contenders — Oscar Bonavena, Jimmy Ellis, Leotis Martin, Karl Mildener, Floyd Patterson, Jerry Quarry, Thad Spencer, and Ernie Terrell — were superior or even equal to Ali. The winner of the tournament would probably fight Sonny Liston, the fading star, or Joe Frazier, the rising star.

The mediocre talent pool left some boxing executives wondering if they could somehow persuade Ali to accept a symbolic role in the U.S. military. If he would agree to perform boxing exhibitions for soldiers as Joe Louis had during World War II, Ali would avoid prison and he might be cleared to return to boxing in a year or two. If he continued to resist the draft, on the other hand, he might never fight again.

The Louisville Sponsoring Group had already tried to change Ali's mind by explaining how much money he stood to lose. Now, in the spring of 1967, Bob Arum, the lawyer who led Main Bout, planned to try again. That year, Main Bout was still a side project for Arum, who practiced law in New York. One of the senior partners at his firm, Arthur Krim, was a powerful entertainment lawyer and a top advisor to President Lyndon Johnson. "Krim went to see Lyndon Johnson," said Arum, "and that's when Lyndon Johnson proposed a deal . . . that he [Ali] doesn't have to go in, he doesn't have to wear a uniform, he just does exhibitions at the Army bases." If Ali took the deal, he might have been allowed to continue fighting professionally even while he served his country, Arum said.

Arum asked football's Jim Brown, one of his partners in Main Bout, to help sell the deal to his friend Ali. Brown organized a meeting of many of the nation's leading black athletes, including Bill Russell, Lew Alcindor (later known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), Curtis McClinton (of the Kansas City Chiefs), Bobby Mitchell (Washington Redskins), Sid Williams (Cleveland Browns), Jim Shorter (Redskins), Walter Beach (Browns), Willie Davis (Green Bay Packers), as well as Carl Stokes, a prominent black attorney

in Cleveland who would go on to become the first black mayor of a major American city. The meeting was held in Cleveland, in the offices of Brown's Negro Industrial Economic Union. Years later, the gathering would be described by Brown and journalists as a test of Ali's sincerity, an opportunity for his black peers to declare their support for the boxer's principled stand. After listening to Ali's passionate speech and challenging him with hard questions, this impressive lineup of men agreed to address the media and lend their support, or so the story went years later.

In truth, the meeting was about money first, principle second.

Arum, Brown, Herbert Muhammad, and the other partners in Main Bout would lose a great source of income if Ali never boxed again. Main Bout depended on closed-circuit TV revenues to thrive, and it seemed unlikely that millions of customers were going to line up outside movie theaters to watch Jerry Quarry versus Thad Spencer. Nor was there any guarantee that other fighters would sign contracts with Main Bout. Ali was committed to the company because of his loyalty to Herbert Muhammad. Ali was the company's greatest asset, but he was worthless to them if he wasn't fighting. Arum hoped that Brown and the other leading black athletes would persuade Ali to make a deal with the military and continue boxing, and Arum was prepared to reward the athletes by cutting them in on Main Bout's business. He promised a kind of affirmative action plan — promising that black athletes would receive closed-circuit franchises in some of the nation's top markets. If Ali could be convinced to return to boxing, those athletes — including several of the men meeting in Cleveland — stood to make money from Ali's fights.

That was the main purpose of the gathering, according to Arum: "to convince Ali to take the deal because it opened up tremendous opportunities for black athletes." The average salary for a professional football player in 1967 was about \$25,000. Professional basketball players made an average of about \$20,000 a year. With closed-circuit deals, some of the athletes would double or triple their annual income, and they would continue to make money from their franchises long after their athletic careers ended.

"But I wasn't setting it up for the athletes to rally around Ali," Arum said of the meeting in Cleveland. "Who the fuck cared at that point?"

When Brown met with Ali the night before the summit, Ali made it clear he would not be swayed. Still, Ali would not be facing an easy crowd. The men assembling in Cleveland were strong-willed. Several of them were mil-

itary veterans. Others believed that Elijah Muhammad's ideology was racist and, if followed through, would lead to an American apartheid. They arrived intent on lecturing Ali, if not changing his mind.

"My first reaction was that it was unpatriotic," recalled Willie Davis, who played defensive end for the Packers. Davis said he intended to tell Ali that he owed it to his country to serve in the military.

But when Ali walked in the room, everything changed. Usually, Ali could count on his size and physical grace to make an impression when he entered, using his presence alone the way he used his jab, to set up the big right hand, which, in this case, was his gregarious personality. This time, almost everyone in the room was big, strong, and confident. Still, Ali managed to stand out, overpowering the men with his energy and steady stream of lightning-fast speech. He never stayed in his seat long. He interrupted others to crack jokes, and when his turn came to speak at length, he walked quickly and purposefully, like a preacher working the aisles of his church, establishing eye contact, calling the men by their first names, making each person in the room feel as if he were addressing them individually. When the others aimed hard questions at him, Ali never got defensive. He spoke passionately and confidently and with good humor, clearly enjoying the debate.

"Well, I know what I must do," he told the group. "My fate is in the hands of Allah, and Allah will take care of me. If I walk out of this room today and get killed today, it will be Allah's doing and I will accept it. I'm not worried. In my first teachings I was told we would all be tested by Allah. This may be my test."

John Wooten confirmed that the point of the meeting was business, not morality. But, at the same time, he said, the men wanted to hear Ali explain why he was refusing the draft.

Curtis McClinton, a halfback with the Kansas City Chiefs, was a member of the U.S. Army's active reserves at the time. He told Ali that while he respected the boxer's religion, it was important to remember his nationality, too. McClinton said he told Ali: "Hey, man, all you'd do is get a uniform and you'd be boxing at all the bases around the country . . . Your presence on military bases gives that motivation to military men . . . that we recognize them and give them respect." Ali seemed to think about it, as if he could see the value in his service. "It was a very dynamic conflict within him," said McClinton, who compared Ali to a child on the verge of adulthood, realizing that

he faced a life-changing decision and the options were not black and white. "The whole issue of his transition to Islam, all of that had to be laid out and baked like a good cake. He knew all the ingredients. But what was he really?" If Ali laughed a lot during the meeting, McClinton said, it probably reflected his uncertainty. "If you knew Muhammad Ali," he commented, the laughter "was really a way of dealing with it to move forward."

Bill Russell was fascinated by Ali's position. It would have been easy for the boxer to compromise, Russell said. Ali could have kept his faith but played it down in public. He could have convinced himself and others that he would be no good to the Nation of Islam and no good to the movement for Black Power if he had to spend time in jail. Russell said the men gathered in Cleveland were prepared to help Ali if he changed his mind and sought a compromise. The men were ready to say they had persuaded the boxer to cut a deal with the government so that he could continue to fight — in the ring and for his people. They were prepared to accept their share of criticism from the black community if Ali was attacked for waffling. But it was clear throughout the meeting, Russell said, that Ali would not compromise.

"Three, four, five hours — I don't know how long we stayed in that back room," Jim Brown recalled. "Everybody had a chance to ask him all the questions they wanted to. Eventually, everybody was satisfied that his stand was genuine based on his religion and that we would back him."

Brown led the group to a press conference. Ali, Brown, Russell, and Lew Alcindor sat at a long table, the rest of the men standing behind them.

"There's nothing new to say," Ali announced, perhaps recognizing that reporters expected him to make big news by backing down from his antiwar stand.

"We heard his views and know he is completely sincere in his beliefs," Brown told the media.

In an article for *Sports Illustrated* written shortly after the meeting, Russell wrote that he envied Ali: "He has something I have never been able to attain and something very few people I know possess. He has an absolute and sincere faith . . . I'm not worried about Muhammad Ali. He is better equipped than anyone I know to withstand the trials in store for him. What I'm worried about is the rest of us."

Two weeks later, an all-white jury needed only twenty minutes to find Ali guilty of draft evasion. Judge Joe Ingraham handed down the maximum sen-

tence: five years in prison and a ten-thousand-dollar fine. Ali was permitted to remain free while his lawyers appealed the ruling, but his passport was taken as a condition of his bail. The severe punishment was no doubt intended to send a message to others contemplating draft evasion, and there were a growing number. The day of the conviction, Congress voted overwhelmingly to extend the draft four more years. Another vote, inspired by antiwar protesters, made desecration of the American flag a federal crime.

Boxing officials had already stripped Ali of his title. Now, as he faced more serious punishment, white newspaper reporters attacked again, calling him a coward and a traitor, wondering why he wasn't more thankful for all that America had done for him, allowing him (as if he had needed permission) to rise from modest circumstances to become one of the most famous men of his time, with the opportunity to be a hero to his people and example to youth.

Black journalists were sometimes more even-handed. While some complained that the boxer was letting down his country, others said he was clearly a victim of discrimination, that the government had targeted him for his race and religion. "Clay should serve his time in the Army just like any other young, healthy all-American boy," wrote James Hicks in a syndicated column appearing in the *Louisville Defender*. "But what better vehicle to use to put an uppity Negro back in his place than the United States Army." Before, Ali had been seen as a great athlete and a rebel with peculiar taste in religion; now, at least in some eyes, he was a martyr, a victim of racism, a battler of excessive American power, and a fighter for something bigger than money or championship belts.

Three days after his conviction, Ali stood atop a garbage can and addressed antiwar protesters in Los Angeles. "I'm with you," he said. "Anything designed for peace and to stop the killing I'm for one hundred percent. I'm not a leader. I'm not here to advise you. But I encourage you to express yourself and stop this war." Soon after Ali left the scene, police attacked the protesters. When Ali saw the ensuing riot on television that night, he vowed not to participate in further demonstrations.

The growing number of antiwar protests infuriated J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI director. Hoover used the Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) in an attempt to neutralize the growing movement of black activists who, like Ali and Martin Luther King, seemed to be expanding the scope of their protests. FBI agents watched Ali's house in Chicago, according to Ali's

cousin, Charlotte Waddell, who lived for a little while in the basement and said FBI agents approached her and asked for her help in gathering information about the Nation of Islam and Ali. Waddell said she refused.

Hoover may have been paranoid. He may have been racist. He may have been behaving like an authoritarian. But he also may have had reason to worry: When people like Ali and King challenged the merits of the war in Vietnam, more Americans questioned the necessity of the military campaign; more people asked why they should send their sons to fight and die in a conflict they didn't fully understand. When Ali refused to fight, the civil rights activist Julian Bond said, the action reverberated. "You could hear people talking about it on street corners," Bond told writer Dave Zirin. "It was on everyone's lips. People who had never thought about the war — black and white — began to think it through because of Ali. The ripples were enormous." Ali's stance wasn't the only reason people began to think more critically about the war. Reporters in Vietnam sent back TV and newspaper stories about the horrors and seeming futility of the combat. At the same time, more young men were being called to service. The ripples, as Julian Bond called them, formed questions: Why was America willing to sacrifice so many lives for Vietnam? Why were black Americans suffering disproportionate numbers of casualties? Why were so many wealthy young white men avoiding service by enrolling in college or by hiring lawyers to exploit technicalities in draft laws while poorer men got swept up in the draft? And, as a leaflet distributed by the Students for a Democratic Society asked, "What kind of America is it whose response to the poverty and oppression in Vietnam is napalm and defoliation? Whose response to poverty and oppression in Mississippi is silence?"

In Newark, delegates at the First National Conference on Black Power voted to recommend that black athletes boycott the Olympics and all boxing matches until Muhammad Ali's status as champion was restored. "We've got to boycott all boxing, all fights, every sponsor on a national level," Dick Gregory told the assembly. "Wherever they are fighting. And only this will make them give him [Ali] back his title." The delegates, many of them in African clothing, also voted to boycott Negro publications that accepted advertisements for hair straighteners and bleaching creams.

Freedomways, a magazine aimed at black readers, was one of the few publications to recognize immediately the larger point of Ali's latest fight, writing

in an editorial: "Mr. Ali's case raises questions of great import for the entire country, and most especially for the 22,000,000 Americans of African descent. This is quite aside from any consideration of the blatant immorality of the particular war against the Vietnamese people which Muhammad Ali is protesting together with millions of other Americans. It is also aside from considering his constitutionally guaranteed right to practice his religious beliefs as a matter of conscience.

"While we are not claiming any special privilege for Negro Americans, what we are challenging is the moral right of this nation, *based upon its record*, to insist that any Black man must put on the military uniform, at any time, and go thousands of miles away from these shores to risk his life for a society which has historically been his oppressor."

In one of the final poems before his death, Langston Hughes reflected on the white racist reaction to the civil rights movement and to the growing criticism among blacks of the war in Vietnam. In "Backlash Blues," Hughes wrote that America gave blacks second-class homes and second-class schools. He asked,

*Do you think that colored folks
Are just second-class fools?*

played Wyatt Earp on TV, standing in her living room. Ali had met O'Brien and persuaded the actor to come home and play a gag on his wife.

"I think that's the time he was the best man in the whole world to me," Belinda said years later of her husband. "I was happy when he wasn't making money. I was most happy."

Ali had an extraordinary appetite for sex, and Belinda learned to enjoy it, too. Ali was gorgeous, with a body that might have been carved by Michelangelo, and exceptionally well equipped as a lover. He had only one flaw in the bedroom, although it was not evident to Belinda until years later, when she had been with other men: Ali was a selfish lover, paying scant attention to her pleasure, she said. Still, the seventeen-year-old was not complaining, and after only a month or so of marriage, she became pregnant.

The Alis, in some respects, were like a lot of newlyweds. Money was tight, the future uncertain, dreams big. Belinda worried that her in-laws were not crazy about her — perhaps because she was a Muslim and perhaps because Odessa and Cash were still fond of Sonji. But it didn't take Belinda long to establish a connection with Odessa. Odessa got along with everyone. Odessa was the only one who could put Muhammad Ali in his place and get away with it. "Oh, you're pretty, but Rock's handsome," Odessa would say, referring to her other son, Rahaman. "Rock's stronger, too!" It drove Ali crazy, but everything Odessa said came out sugarcoated. Cash was different. Cash was not like any man Belinda had ever met. She was stunned to hear Cash refer to himself as a "whore-runner." What sort of man brags about such things? Cash told Belinda he liked women with big legs and big chests — "them stallions," he called them. "But I ain't leaving my wife for that crap," he said, as if such fealty would impress his daughter-in-law. "My wife knows what I'm doing."

Odessa surely did know. Back in May, Cash's womanizing had made headlines in Louisville. He had been out with two friends at Billy Limp's Chicken Shack when a woman had come to the restaurant's door. "I'm in trouble now," Clay had told his friends upon spotting the woman. Cash had stepped outside, according to the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, whereupon the woman had stabbed him in the chest.

Belinda and Muhammad Ali spent most of the first year of marriage on the South Side of Chicago, in their 1,300-square-foot brick house at the corner of 85th Street and Jeffery Boulevard. Rahaman, still shadowing his big

26

Martyr

Ali was broke. He was behind on alimony and facing criminal charges for failing to pay his ex-wife. He was squabbling with his parents. His own lawyer was suing him, claiming that Ali owed \$284,615 in legal fees for the work that had gone into keeping him out of jail on draft-dodging charges.

Still, the stress didn't seem to get to him. With no fights to promote, no training schedule to follow, and no entourage accompanying him, he was free to lavish attention on his new wife. Belinda supported Ali's decision to buck the draft, even if it meant jail time for him and poverty for them both. They were still getting to know each other. They were adjusting to sharing space in the same house. Belinda had been trained at the Muhammad University of Islam to be a housewife, and now she put those skills to use, cooking every night for her husband and washing and ironing his clothes. "She was like a giddy little schoolgirl," said Charlotte Waddell, Ali's cousin, who lived in the basement of the newlyweds' home. "They were always joking and laughing, watching TV all the time, eating popcorn."

Muhammad and Belinda adored Westerns, and they pretended to be cowboys sometimes. "You better get out of town, Belinda," Ali would say, "and your horse better be fast." Belinda would give her husband a hard stare, put her hands on her hips, where her imaginary pistol was holstered, and answer, "Naw, cuz I'm about to draw!" One night, Belinda was asleep on the sofa when she heard the door open and a man's voice say, "Hey, you better get out of town before sunrise." The voice was familiar but it wasn't Ali's. Belinda sprang from the sofa and flicked on the light to see Hugh O'Brien, who

brother, rented a place a few blocks away. Belinda and Muhammad's house had been owned or rented by Herbert Muhammad, but Elijah Muhammad had ordered Herbert to give it to the Alis. It had two bedrooms and one bath, wall-to-wall carpeting, a blue velvet couch, and a color TV that nestled inside a marble fireplace opposite the couch.

One morning, a reporter from *Esquire* magazine visited. Ali was shirtless, stretched out on the couch and running his hands over his flabby belly. A game show flashed on the TV, depriving the reporter of Ali's full attention. The boxer showed off his newest gadget—a small remote control that allowed him to adjust the sound on the TV without getting up and crossing the room, perfect for when his brother and Bundini Brown weren't around. Ali's eyes drifted to the screen as he tried to convince his visitor he was a busy man, even in exile. "And tonight," Ali said, "they're having this big musical and they want me to say a few words about whatever I want to talk about. Then I got a call from this college in Hartford—I forgot the name of it—and they want me up there . . . There's always something. Everybody wants me." One had the impression that Ali, if formally invited, would appear, no questions asked, for the opening of an envelope.

Behind the fireplace was a mirrored wall, and Ali checked it at times to see how his performance was getting across. "It's impossible for me to dry up and have nothing to do. I mean I just don't represent boxing. I'm taking a stand for what I believe in and being one thousand percent for the freedom of the black people. Naturally those who have the same fight, but on a smaller scale, they come to me," and then he whispered, quoting the average black man: "'You speak for me, too, brother, you speak for me, too. I make my money from Charley but I'm with you.'" He lifted his voice again. "So I got hundreds of places to go and talk and I'll always have them as long as I'm talking for freedom."

At about 12:30 in the afternoon, he put on a striped shirt and a black leather jacket and invited the reporter to get in the car, saying he needed to go downtown to pick up Belinda, who was attending secretarial school in the Loop so that she could learn to type Ali's letters. Ali drove her to school every morning and picked her up every afternoon. His Eldorado sat by the curb. As he drove north on Lake Shore Drive, careful to stay below the forty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit, he adjusted the small record player under the dashboard and talked more about how busy he was, how he scarcely found

time for religious study. "You see, I'm a minister and I have to know these things because of the questions they ask me," he said.

When Ali reached the Loop, Belinda, now three months pregnant, climbed into the backseat of the car. Ali dropped her off at the house, asked her to cook steak and vegetables for dinner, and drove away, saying, "We got something important to do." Then he went to get a carwash for his already sparkling-clean Eldorado. When the carwash turned out to be closed, he went home to watch more TV. The reporter, Leonard Shecter, had a hard time making sense of Ali at times. On the one hand, Ali complained that Uncle Sam was trying to starve and humiliate him. On the other hand, he said he was grateful the government had decided to release him on bond and allow him to travel the country, and that he had to be careful not to say or do anything that might make the feds change their minds.

Belinda served the men dinner. Ali shook pepper on his boiled okra and cabbage.

"Belinda, bring me some diet cola," he said.

"Belinda, bring the steak."

"Belinda, bring me some brown sugar."

He declared the steak too tough.

"Bring me some chicken."

"It's cold," Belinda said.

"Bring it anyway."

He ate quickly, left the table, and went to his bedroom to change his clothes, singing *Ain't Too Proud to Beg* while he dressed. When Belinda joined him in the bedroom, Shecter could hear the couple cooing. Ali emerged wearing a shiny black suit, white shirt, and dark tie, and saying he was going to show the reporter what he did now that he wasn't boxing. They drove to LaTees Beauty Parlor and Barber Shop on South Drexel Avenue, then to 79th Street, where they dropped in on the reporters and editors at *Muhammad Speaks*. Ali paid no attention to no-parking signs as he moved from one destination to another. In later years, he would tell friends that when he saw a curb painted yellow or red, he took it to mean that the city had reserved a parking space for him; his friends were never sure if Ali meant it as a joke. At the newspaper office, he opened a cabinet drawer containing thousands of pictures from his boxing career. He pulled out a bunch, reminisced a while, and put them back.

Then they were on the move again, headed to the Shabazz restaurant on 71st Street for a big piece of chocolate cake, which Ali ate in five bites. On his way out, he bought a piece of bean pie and ate it in two bites. Whenever they got to the car, Ali did a search for his keys. They were always in a different pocket. Occasionally, he locked them in the car.

He arrived at a theater where he had been asked to speak, but he was two hours early and the doors were locked. To pass the time, he wandered along the sidewalk, trying to attract attention. "I'm looking for a fight!" he barked to anyone in earshot. "Who's the baddest man around here?"

The whole thing saddened Shecter. Ali seemed at a loss. A national magazine writer was accompanying him, recording his every word and every action, and it was not enough to sate his ego. With two hours to kill before his next audience could be assembled, he was incapable of enjoying a quiet moment of isolation or introspection, incapable of trying to get to know the man who'd been accompanying him around town all day. Before their time together ended, the reporter asked Ali how he felt about going to jail. Ali managed to turn his answer into a boast.

"Who wants to go to jail?" he said. "I'm used to running around free like a little bird. In jail, you got no wife, no freedom. You can't eat what you want... being in prison every day, looking out of the cell, not seeing nobody... A man's got to be serious in his beliefs to do that."

Esquire decided to put Shecter's story on its April cover, and the magazine's art director, George Lois, was assigned to come up with a design. When Ali arrived at a New York studio to be photographed, Lois showed the boxer a reproduction of Botticini's painting of St. Sebastian, an early Christian martyr, tied to a tree, his body pierced with arrows. Lois asked Ali to pose the same way.

Ali considered it for a moment.

"Hey, George!" he finally answered. "This cat's a *Christian!*"

Lois, a nonpracticing Greek Orthodox, explained that Sebastian had been executed for converting to Christianity, just as Ali had been excoriated for converting to Islam, and he asked Ali for permission to call Elijah Muhammad to explain. Ali agreed, and Lois spent the next ten minutes on the phone discussing imagery and religious symbolism with the Nation of Islam's leader. Elijah Muhammad, who understood the power of the media better than most, gave his blessings.

The arrows were too heavy to stick to Ali's body with glue, so the *Esquire* crew tied fishing line to the arrows and hung them from a bar high above Ali's head. Ali, wearing nothing but white Everlast boxing shorts, white boxing shoes, and white socks, had to hold still until photographer Carl Fischer and his assistants could line up the arrows with the fake blood painted on the boxer's body — two in the chest, one below the heart, two in the stomach, one in the thigh. Lois was struck by Ali's patience and good humor. At one point, the fighter pointed to the arrows and gave them each a name, "Lyndon Johnson, General William Westmoreland, Robert McNamara..."

The *Esquire* cover may have been the best publicity Ali ever received. The headline would read, "The Passion of Muhammad Ali," but it was the photo that made the greatest impact. The image of the mighty boxer as a martyr, his hands tied behind his back, blood dripping from his torso, his head tilted, mouth agape in anguish, brought together three of the most searing issues in American culture: race, religion, and the Vietnam War. And it made people think: Maybe there was more to the noisome boxer than they believed. Had Ali been a Christian, like St. Sebastian, would he have been treated differently? Would he have been admired for abandoning his personal and professional desires to follow the word of God? Would he have been deemed a hero for converting his religious ideals into action?

Of course, when Ali posed for George Lois, neither man could have imagined how the timing of that magazine cover would magnify its power. On April 4, 1968, just as the magazine was appearing on newsstands and in mailboxes, Martin Luther King Jr. was in Memphis to speak at a rally for striking sanitation workers and to promote his campaign against poverty. At 6:05 p.m., as King stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, he was struck in the chest with one round from a rifle and killed.

Ali told reporters, "Dr. King was my great Black Brother, and he'll be remembered for thousands of years to come." Later, he would speak less kindly, calling King "the best friend White America ever had."

Robert F. Kennedy, who had recently announced plans to run for the presidency, learned of the murder moments before he was to give a speech in Indianapolis. He abandoned his prepared remarks and delivered an extemporaneous eulogy, saying, "Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort. In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it's perhaps well

to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black . . . you can be filled with bitterness, and with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization — black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand, and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, compassion, and love.”

Two months later, Robert Kennedy was assassinated in a hotel kitchen after a speech in Los Angeles.

It would stand as one of the most tumultuous years in American history. Riots erupted at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Daniel and Philip Berrigan led a group of Catholic activists in seizing hundreds of draft cards and setting them aflame with homemade napalm, an act that inspired an escalation of antiwar protests around the country. Women fighting for equal rights tossed their bras, mops, frying pans, and girdles into garbage cans in protest at the Miss America beauty contest in Atlantic City. Richard M. Nixon won the presidential election, but the segregationist Alabama governor George Wallace, running as an independent, received almost 10 million votes. Black athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in a black-power salute when “The Star Spangled Banner” was played at their medal ceremony during the Olympic Games in Mexico City, a gesture that would have been unthinkable before Ali.

It was in this context that Ali as St. Sebastian greeted Americans — as a man who divided and inspired and suffered for his beliefs, a man shot through with enemy arrows. If Ali’s religion struck some black Americans as a con man’s game, and if white Americans could only scratch their heads trying to understand why Ali would praise the segregationist views of George Wallace, the nuances mattered less with every passing day, every passing riot, every passing protest march. All around was chaos, bloodshed, and disorder. Ali wasn’t the only one bleeding.

On May 6, 1968, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed Ali’s conviction for draft dodging, ruling that the boxer had no legitimate claim as a Muslim minister or conscientious objector to avoid military service. Nor had

he been the victim of discrimination, the court declared. If he didn’t join the army, he would go to jail.

Ali remained free as his lawyers prepared an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Nation of Islam had already lent him \$27,000 to help him cover some of his legal and living expenses. He paid that back and soon after borrowed another \$100,000. But even with the loans, he struggled to keep up with his bills. To make money, beginning in the fall of 1967, he began presenting lectures on college campuses, earning between five hundred and three thousand dollars per appearance.

The lectures produced anxiety in Ali, who was insecure about his reading and writing abilities and uncertain what kind of questions he might face from college students. He listened to recordings of Elijah Muhammad’s sermons and read Muhammad’s book *Message to the Blackman in America*, slowly copying lines and ideas from those sources onto index cards that he could keep in the pocket of his suit jacket. It was painstaking work. For Ali, it was the beginning of a battle to overcome the dyslexia and poor reading skills that had hampered him since childhood. In years to come, he would fill hundreds if not thousands of yellow legal pads with transcriptions from Elijah Muhammad’s writings and from the Koran. He would read the Christian Bible too, trying to identify contradictions in the text, and he would write those down. He would invite reporters to his home or to his hotel rooms, pull out those legal pads, and read from them, sometimes for hours.

He hired an agent to arrange lectures, and the agent ran an ad in *Variety*. A picture showed Ali in boxing gloves with the following copy: “Muhammad Ali, world’s heavyweight champion (Cassius Clay) — Available for Lectures — Nationwide Training Tour — Personal Appearances — Theaters — Country Fairs — Arenas — Colleges — Universities — One-nighters.”

In addressing college students in 1967 and 1968, Ali typically kept his remarks brief. He swore allegiance to Elijah Muhammad. He reminded listeners that he had proved his religious commitment by divorcing his first wife and forfeiting millions of dollars in income. He bragged that he was still the true heavyweight champion and would remain champion until someone defeated him in the boxing ring. He mocked other fighters, and for those who looked at his rounder-than-usual face and wondered if he was getting out of shape, he demonstrated his speed and agility with a flurry of air punches and

a display of his speedy footwork, always to great applause. Of course, he also spoke about his opposition to the war.

"DOWN WITH EVERYTHING": that was the message on a popular T-shirt. At the time, it seemed everything was up for grabs, under attack. Everybody had something to protest. Some young men and women protested in the broadest way. They attacked conformity. They dropped out—of school, of marriage, of life. They did drugs. They grew their hair long. They took to the road and lived out of their cars, beholden, they said, to no one but themselves. Others went to Mississippi and Alabama, into territory at the heart of the civil rights struggle, to register voters and organize protests. But as the fight for Black Power grew more radical and riots erupted in big cities, many white activists turned their energies to the antiwar movement. As that movement grew, protesters sensed, increasingly, that their voices might be heard, that if they were bold enough and numerous enough and determined enough, they might just force the U.S. government to leave Vietnam.

"I'm expected to go overseas to help free people in South Vietnam," Ali said in one lecture, "and at the same time my people here are being brutalized; hell no! I would like to say to those of you who think I have lost too much: I have gained everything. I have peace of heart; I have a clear, free conscience. And I am proud." He said he would face a firing squad before renouncing Elijah Muhammad and Islam.

He adapted his remarks depending on the makeup of his audience. For an all-black crowd at the University of Pennsylvania, he said integration would never work. "There's no sense in Negroes wanting to integrate with whites," he said. "White folks don't want any black babies walking around in their neighborhood and we don't need any white babies walking around in ours." No white man wanted a kinky-haired, light-brown son, he said, just as no black man wanted a cream-colored child.

At Appalachian State University in North Carolina, he once again expressed admiration for the white segregationist George Wallace and repeated his refrain about all the animals and people of the world preferring to be among their own. "Chinese like to be with Chinese," he said, "because they eat with chopsticks and they like that pling, ting, tong, ting music. They don't dig Johnny Cash." In the same lecture, he said, "The black man was robbed of his language, the slaves were mated like animals . . . he was robbed of his religion, he was robbed of his god, he was robbed of his culture. So we have

anation of people called Negroes who are suffering a mental death. And this death is going on 500 long years."

In Los Angeles, he mocked the Black Power movement as nothing but a fad, saying the modern Negro radical "has an African haircut and African clothes and a white girl on his arm." Haircuts mattered. Black activists made "Black Is Beautiful" a rallying cry, fighting back against longstanding prejudices. For many young men and women in the 1960s, being black and beautiful meant letting their hair grow high and wide. Ali's own hair was something of a compromise. He wore it longer than most members of the Nation of Islam, but not nearly as long as other young radicals.

"We're not Negroes," he said at a stop in Richmond, Virginia. "All people on this planet are named after a country. People from Mexico are called Mexicans. People from Russia are called Russians. People from Egypt are called Egyptians . . . Now what country is named 'Negroes'?" That one always got a great laugh, although many of the people who laughed scratched their heads later when they realized it didn't entirely make sense. Race and nationality were two different things.

In Springfield, Massachusetts, Ali compared the black American who rioted in protest to a bull who charged a train. "He's a brave, brave bull," Ali said. "But his tracks are his only monument."

In Phoenix, he said he was through with boxing, declaring that he intended to do nothing else but "fight for my people."

Hecklers occasionally interrupted, calling him a draft-dodger. Critics occasionally called out some of the flaws in his logic, pointing out, for example, that redbirds and bluebirds belong to different species, which makes mating extremely unlikely. But most of Ali's audience members—liberal white college students, in all likelihood—were charmed by his sincerity and good humor. Ali challenged them to reconsider their prejudices, but he did not issue threats of violence as Black Panther leaders did. He closed his remarks, usually, by rallying the crowds to shout his name as he asked, over and over again until the answer grew loud enough to satisfy him, "Whooooo's the greatest? Whooooo's the champ? Whooooo's the champ? Whooooo's the greatest of alllll tiiiiimes?"

On June 18, 1968, Belinda gave birth to her first child. Elijah Muhammad visited the hospital and suggested the baby's name: Maryum.