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Rhetoric
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Fighting the Draft: The Rhetoric of Muhammad Ali

Without a doubt, one of the most outspoken and charismatic personalities of all time, someone who transcended the world of sports and pop culture, is Muhammad Ali. He has charmed fans, celebrities, and journalists for years with his wit and humor. He's arguably the first trash-talker the world of sports has ever known, famous for baiting opponents with insults in the lead-up to a fight, trading jabs with Howard Cosell in interviews, as well as taunting fighters ferociously during fights. He was an advocate for social justice and a man who stood up for his religious beliefs, all while being one of the greatest boxers of all-time.

Ali was drafted to join the Army and fight in Vietnam, one of the most debated issues of all time in our country. This happened at the onset of the war and at the height of his popularity in the boxing world. A devout member of the Nation of Islam, Ali famously refused to report after being drafted, which led to his arrest, the suspension of his boxing license, and loss of his title as heavyweight champion of the world. He would never face any jail time, but he lost three years of his career, in his prime, before any state would renew his boxing license.

Ali claimed that, due to his religion, as a peaceful Islamic minister, it was against his beliefs to fight in this war. He famously stated, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Congs..." Through the analysis of Ali's rhetoric and his dealings with the media, as well as a speech he gave to a congregation at Temple University, one can clearly see the progression of Ali from un-patriotic draft dodger to a symbol of the nation's feelings towards an unjust war. It was quite the transformation.

Before analyzing Ali's rhetoric in his speeches and interviews with the media during the time he was exiled from boxing, it's important to understand Ali's personal beliefs, as well as the severity of his decision. It is through this knowledge that one can appreciate Ali's words and the style in which he presented them. I intend to break down Ali's rhetoric through his dealings with the media as well as in a speech he made at Temple University about his stance on the war. In doing so, we will see how Ali's speech compares to various rhetorical theories and understand the importance of Ali's words at the time in which they were spoken, as well as today.

When Ali first opposed being drafted, he was very much viewed as anti-American. The 1960's was a time of increased racial tension, and Ali's alliance with the Nation of Islam and other prominent black leaders of the day did not help his image when it came to how the rest of the nation viewed him, in particular, white America. Ali was already viewed by many white members of the media as a brash, arrogant boxer who talked to much, and his affiliation with the Nation of Islam seemed to only worsen that perception. "And now, on top of everything, he was refusing to serve his country, which to his enemies made him an unpatriotic draft dodger," said John Condon, former Director of Publicity for Madison Square Garden - a legendary sports venue in New York City which hosted numerous Ali fights.

On January 24, 1964, almost two years after being originally classified 1-A available for the draft and one month before his famous bout with Sonny Liston, Ali traveled to Florida for the military qualifying examination. The 1-A classification is given by the Selective Service System and is the highest draft classification, meaning that the individual is immediately ready for service. While Ali flourished in the physical examination, he finished in the sixteenth percentile in the written examination, far below the passing score of thirty, and was deemed unqualified to serve in the military. Two months later, Ali was re-tested, this time in the presence of three Army

psychologists who were brought in to observe him in order to determine if Ali's scores were legitimate or falsified by Ali, knowing how he felt about the war. Once again, Ali failed and was given the new classification of 1-Y, not qualified for immediate entry into the military. "I said I was the greatest, not the smartest," Ali told reporters. He thought this would be the end of this issue. It hadn't even begun.

Two years later, with an increased presence in Vietnam, the minimum score was dropped from thirty to fifteen, thus leaving Ali eligible to be drafted. On February 14, 1966, Ali's lawyer presented a letter to the Local Board 47 in Louisville, a draft board in Ali's hometown, "requesting deferment from military service on numerous substantive and procedural grounds." That request was denied, and Ali was reclassified as immediately ready to be drafted. He remained steadfast in his opposition to the war.

Not even a week later, on February 20th, the *Chicago Tribune* called on the Illinois State Athletic Commission to cancel the upcoming heavyweight title bout between Muhammad Ali and Ernie Terrell, which was to be held in Chicago. Other newspapers and media members joined in the opposition to Ali, who did not want to see him fight while he was refusing to enter the war. Illinois Attorney General William Clark would rule that the bout violated state law. When Ali tried to bring the fight to Louisville, his hometown, the Kentucky State Senate passed a resolution condemning Ali. "His attitude brings discredit to all loyal Kentuckians and to the names of the thousands who gave their lives for this country during his lifetime," the resolution stated.

Opposition was coming from all over. Former champion boxer Billy Conn said, "I'll never go to another one of his fights. He is a disgrace to the boxing profession." Former congressman from Pennsylvania, Frank Clark said of Ali, "The heavyweight champion of the

world turns my stomach." This was the majority opinion at the time. Ali was a boastful showman which many members of the media and white community at large did not appreciate. His alliance with the Nation of Islam and his dismissal of the draft process only added fuel to that fire.

In August of 1966, after numerous requests and appeals, Ali got a chance to state his case at a special hearing with Lawrence Grauman, a 25-year veteran judge, who would rule on Ali's status. In order to be a conscientious objector, which was what Ali was claiming, he had to prove to Grauman that he was sincere, that it was based on religious training and belief, and that he was opposed to all wars of any kind. It would be easy to doubt Ali's sincerity. Who would want to be taken out of their sport in their prime and fight in a war they didn't believe in, losing millions in the process? He needed to prove to both Grauman, and eventually the public, that he was sincere. Ali handed Grauman a twenty-one page letter and testified under oath.

Ali was poised and concise, respectful and firm. He was sincere. In Ali's letter to Grauman, which can be found in excerpts in Thomas Hauser's book *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times,* he said "I wouldn't go through all of this and lose the millions that I gave up and my image with the American public that I would say is completely dead and ruined because of us in here now." He focused on his Muslim faith and the teachings of the Qur'an, the backbone of his argument. "I wouldn't jeopardize my life walking the streets of the South and all of America with no bodyguard if I wasn't sincere in every bit of what the Holy Qur'an tells us," he said. "We are not to participate in wars on the side of nonbelievers," he added. "We believe in not only part of it, but all of it," in reference to the teachings of the Qur'an. Ali claimed this was a Christian country, not a Muslim country. The non-believers were the Americans.

At the end of the hearing, in a shocking turn of events, Grauman ruled in favor of Ali, stating that he was "of good character, morals, and integrity, and sincere in his objections on

religious grounds to participation in war in any form." Ali's persuasion and rhetorical style made an impression on Grauman, at least. Despite Grauman's ruling, the Department of Justice advised the State Appeal Board that Ali's conscientious objector status be denied.

"How can I kill somebody when I pray five times a day for peace?" Ali stated.

Ali was continuing to appeal, and the situation was heating up. He remained firm in his claim as a conscientious objector. "This is what I sincerely believe," he said. "I've held my faith over the years. I gave up one of the prettiest Negro women in the country. The white businessman in Louisville, Kentucky will tell you that I've turned down eight million dollars in movie contracts and advertisements because of my faith. And this was all before the draft started, so I don't see why I should break the rules of my faith now." That response was characteristic of Ali's dealings with the media at the time. He was firm in his stance and passionate in his speech. While there were hints of race, injustice, and even anger, Ali remained poised in his dealings with the media during the appeals process. In April of 1967, Ali was summoned to report for induction into the Army, after unanimously being classified 1-A by the National Selective Service Presidential Appeal Board, immediately ready for service.

In June of 1967, Ali was convicted for his refusal of induction into the United States armed forces when he refused, three times, to step forward when his name was called at the local draft board recruitment hearing. The maximum sentence allowable - five years' in prison and a ten thousand dollar fine - was imposed and subsequently appealed by Ali's attorneys. Ali's title was stripped from him, he was not allowed to fight anywhere in the United States, and his passport was confiscated so he could not fight overseas. While his lawyers were appealing the ruling, he was exiled from the boxing world.

During the appeals process and his subsequent exile from boxing, Ali spent most of his time doing speaking engagements at colleges all across the country. It was during these speeches where Ali began to change his perception within middle America. According to Ali, he "must have visited over 200 colleges, and I enjoyed it. It made me happy." He had a captive audience who shared his thoughts on the war.

At this point, the opposition of the Vietnam War was reaching its apex, with rallies occurring on campuses throughout the country. Ali in many ways, was a lightning rod for this, as many people began opposing the war for some of the same reasons Ali did. His words resonated with a lot of the spectators at the universities, the majority of whom were white, according to Julian Bond, an activist and civil rights leader. "Ali stood on his own, his impact was special," Bond said. "He was simply a guy, not sophisticated, not well-learned, not an expert in foreign policy, but someone who knew right from wrong and was willing to risk his career for it."

There is one particular speech that exemplifies Ali's rhetoric and his way of words with his collegiate audience at Temple University in 1967. The way he interacts with the crowd and the responses that he receives, it's no wonder why he was dubbed, "The People's Champ."

He opens with a thank you to the student body for inviting him to speak to them and congratulates them for their "stand to stop the bloody war going on in Vietnam." He presents himself as a "Muslim minister." He claims that "the number one greeting in my faith is peace, 'As-salam alaykum,' which means may peace be unto you." The formula to Ali's speeches is simple, be thankful to his crowd in the opening, be sincere in his beliefs throughout the middle, and be energetic in the closing. When he spoke at Temple University, he followed this formula to the letter.

"I have gained a peace of mind, a peace of heart," Ali says. "I have also gained the respect of everyone here today. World wide I have gained respect." Ali says, "I have been told that I have two choices; go to jail or go to the army." That's not good enough for Ali, who won't settle for that. "The alternative is justice," he said. Of course, in true Ali fashion, he doesn't end his speech without getting the crowd in a frenzy. "Who's the heavyweight champion of the world?" he said. Chants of "ALI, ALI" rained down from the rafters. A man who a short time prior to this was painted as an unpatriotic villain, was drawing crowds all over the country and the young adults of America seemed to love him more than ever.

At his speaking engagements, Ali was consistent in his emphasis on his Muslim religion as the reason for his decision not to join the army. Regardless of the topic, he found a way to navigate his religious beliefs into the conversation. "Whatever the punishment, whatever the persecution is for standing up for my beliefs, even if it means facing machine-gun fire that day, I'll face it before denouncing Elijah Muhammad and the religion of Islam," he said in an interview. When asked about the potential financial ramifications of his decision, Ali responded with, "The Lord feeds the birds and the animals. If the Lord has this power, will the Lord let His servant starve, let a man who is doing His work go hungry? I'm not worried. The Lord will provide."

Aristotle, in his book *Rhetoric,* outlines the basic principles for formulating an argument and what characteristics the speaker must possess in order for the audience to believe what he or she is saying. According to Aristotle, he must make his own character look right, put his hearers into the right frame of mind, and make his audience feel that he possesses prudence, virtue, and goodwill.

Probably the most passionate he got was when he was discussing money versus his principles, in which he emphatically stated, “Damn the money. Damn the heavyweight championship. I will die before I sell out my people for the white man’s money. The wealth of America and the friendship of all the people who support the war would be nothing if I’m not content internally and if I’m not in accord with the will of Almighty Allah.” Sincerity, passion, poise. Ali encompassed all of these qualities when speaking during this time, all of which ultimately helped in his eventual rise in popularity.

The speeches did more than just give Ali a platform to plead his case, or a chance to stay in the spotlight while not fighting. It gave the passionate, vocal, collegiate crowd someone to associate with, and whose beliefs they shared. It wasn’t just the war, either. It was a time of unrest in the United States, with racial and social issues flooding the daily conversation. Ali served as a commentary on all of it, and he did it in a way only he could. He was consistent in his messages, and the public couldn’t get enough of his personality and charisma. “The speeches were important, not just for Ali but for everyone who heard them,” said journalist Robert Lipsyte. “A lot of young people wouldn’t have thought this stuff through if it hadn’t been a celebrity lightning rod telling it to them.” Ali’s reach was undeniable, in particular with his collegiate audiences.

Ali would spend three and a half years in exile from boxing, unable to obtain a license anywhere in the world. It was not until the appeal made it all the way to the Supreme Court, which on June 28, 1971, ruled unanimously (8-0) in favor of Ali. The Supreme Court of the United States found the government had failed to properly specify why Ali’s application for conscientious objector status had been denied, thereby overturning the conviction. He returned to the ring in 1971 and would go on to have epic bouts with Joe Frazier and George Foreman in the

next phase of his career. He recaptured the heavyweight title and cemented his legacy as one of the greatest boxers to ever live. His impact would reach far beyond boxing. He was a beacon of social change and a representative of the era in which he fought. In Hauser's book, Ted Kennedy is quoted in an interview as saying, "I think Muhammad's actions contributed enormously to the debate about whether the United States should be in Vietnam." Ali had truly come full circle since he first refused the draft in 1964.

Whether it was "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee," or any of his pre-fight poems/raps about his opponent and how he would defeat them, Ali's words are almost as famous as his accolades in the ring. Ali's words have an excellent cadence and enunciation as evidenced in the speech from Temple University. He sounds like an accomplished orator. He pauses in the right spots, acknowledges the crowd and gets his points across. His style is sincere, but firm. Charming, but serious. Most of this can be attributed to his openness and honesty to discuss the controversial topics of the time -- race, war, religion, etc. He never shied away from these topics, instead attacking them in the media. While discussing the importance of the way someone in crisis would interact with the media in his book *Damage Control,* renowned crisis counselor Eric Dezenhall said, "getting to reporters first with your perspective doesn't guarantee you positive coverage, but it does significantly increase your chances." Ali would take these issues into his own hands, being honest and open about all topics, regardless of how popular his opinions may or may not have been.

There are a couple different ways to look at the words of Ali during the time of his exile from boxing, in particular through the eyes of Richard Lanham within the guidelines of his book, *The Economics of Attention.* Lanham outlines the importance of style as a means of gaining

attention. Attention is the currency in which we deal with in his economy, and Ali was a master of attention. He had to have been one of the people to inspire this theory for Lanham.

In his book, Lanham talks about two artists, Andy Warhol and Christo Javacheff, as examples of attention "economists." Both are very different in their approaches to their work. Christo was "deadly serious about his artistic entrepeneurship and what it intends to teach," while Warhol was "a schemer, an opportunist who asked his friends to suggest objects for his paintings so he wouldn't lose touch with current trends," according to Lanham. However, both mastered the art of grabbing the public's attention, and seeing positive results in their profession because of it. "Both of them made their art from the same substance: attention," he said. One might even say Ali could fall into both categories; the brash, out-spoken, self-promoter, as well as someone with intense passion, an advocate for social justice and reform.

"Rhetoric seemed to divide into two parties," Lanham continued, "those who created attention structures to form and strengthen social purposes and those who sought only to serve themselves." Warhol, admittedly, was in the party that sought to only serve themselves. His only goal was making money. Christo was the complete opposite, all about integrity. Ali at different parts of his career could certainly have fallen into either one, but at this point in time, he was sincere. He was fighting for his beliefs. As we've discussed in many of Ali's speeches and interactions with the media, he is certainly sincere, and he was doing what he truly believed at the time. Sure, he may have been scared to go to prison - who wouldn't? - but he would have crossed that bridge if it got to that point, because those were his unwavering beliefs.

Lanham uses a model for communication called the C-B-S model, the acronym standing for clear, brief, and sincere. "You have a message that you want to send to someone else," he said. "It must be clear, it must be brief, and you must be sincere." While there are loopholes to

this theory, due to the complexity of human emotion and how we deal with each other, which Lanham explains. Ali's rhetoric proves this principle, which helps with his success as a speaker. The sincerity is evident to his audience, particularly when discussing what lengths he will go to for his beliefs and when talking about racial and social injustice in the United States, which takes precedent for him.

There is definitely a purpose in everything he said, and he understood the severity of his situation. As we discussed in regards to his style, he had good cadence when he spoke. He paused in the right spots, he gave his words time to sink in to his audience. For the most part, he was brief. He spoke for a cause. He did it with a charisma that only he possessed. He knew how to play to his audience and there was no coincidence that most of his speeches ended with the crowd chanting his name at the end of it.

There's a segment in *Economics of Attention,* in which Lanham outlined a couple of rules to capitalize on the audience's attention. Some of these are particularly true of Ali.

"Build attention traps." Even when Ali was exiled from boxing he managed to stay in the public eye. Lanham talked about Andy Warhol capitalizing on specific pop-culture symbols and icons for monetary gain as an attention trap; something that was already popular and he capitalized on it. Ali was a larger than life figure who opposed the Vietnam War, like so many others during that time. He took on a topic that was growing increasingly fervent, in a public setting, which ultimately helped his cause. He was always the center of attention.

Much like the second rule, "understand the logic of the centripetal gaze and how to profit from it." Ali was arguably better on camera or at the podium then he was in the ring, which is saying something. Even when he was in exile from boxing, he never disappeared. Ali's speeches gave him an opportunity to expand his reach, as well as persuade his opposition. He wouldn't

necessary profit from a monetary standpoint during this time, but he gained the acceptance of public opinion and the fans who turned on him would eventually welcome him back to boxing with open arms, reaching new heights in popularity.

"Draw your inspiration from your audience, not your muse." Ali may have started this crusade against the United States justice system and the war in Vietnam alone, but by the end he had an entire generation behind him. He knew his audience, which is why he spoke in college settings. Through his speeches he became a lightning rod for social activism and opposition against the war. The generation of young people who opposed the war had someone to look to and an example to follow. While most people opposed Ali and his decision at first, the public's perception of the war started to match Ali's as time went on. "Then you take your grand idea and you persuade people to share its grandeur," Lanham said. Ali's audience began to grow, and through his words, more people began to align themselves with him on the issue of war. This is exactly what Ali ended up doing, whether it was his intention or not.

"Live in the present." Ali was the 1960's in every form and fashion. He represented the sports world, he represented the country's issues with Vietnam, and he represented the civil rights battle that was raging in the United States. He didn't shy away from any of these issues; instead he embraced them. He embraced conversation about racism, inter-racial marriage, and other taboo topics of the day. He always focused on improving and fixing the issues of the time because they were important to him. Ali is a perfect example of one of Lanham's attention economists.

One of Ali's biggest obstacles throughout the entire process was convincing not only the courts, but the public, that he was sincere. In court, according to Justice William Douglas' concurring opinion, Ali testified that "he was sincere in every bit of what the Holy Qur'an and

the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad tell us and it is that we are not to participate in wars on the side of non-believers." That was enough for Justice Douglas who would go on to say in conclusion of his opinion, "That is a matter of belief, of conscience, of religious principle. I would reverse the judgment." Convincing the public, on the other hand, took years. Jerry Izenberg, journalist for the *Newark Star-Ledger* who covered Ali during his career, summed it up perfectly, "Look at the way the country has changed. Today, who doesn't feel that Ali's stand on Vietnam was understandable and basically justified." Undoubtedly, a lot of the change in the public perception of Ali had to do with the country's growing opposition to the war, but Ali's words and actions also played a role in that perception change. Ali was sincere in his beliefs and that meant something to the people whom he was speaking to, who were sincere in their opposition to the war as well.

A question was posed in class when discussing female authors fighting for equality that was particularly interesting and important to this analysis, "How do you fuse rage but still have an ability to subdue it, so you get your point across without seeming like you're ranting?" This question struck me, because I think this is something Ali was able to master. Was there rage in Ali? Absolutely. "Why should they ask me," he proclaimed, "to put on a uniform and go ten 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs?" He would go on to say, when a reporter asked him about the war, "If I thought going to war would bring freedom and equality to 22 million of my people, they wouldn't have to draft me; I'd join tomorrow."

"I'll go to jail," he continued, "we've been in jail for 400 years." The rage was evident in Ali. The fact that he would go to jail for his beliefs further revealed a unique character trait in him, his sincerity.

As a black man growing up in Louisville, he saw his fair share of racism. He was keen to it, he fought against it, he aligned himself with a powerful black nation and black leaders of the time. He witnessed the injustice first hand and it certainly bothered him, as it should have. What Ali was blessed with, that unfortunately many of us are not, is charisma. The definition of charisma is, "compelling attractiveness or charm that can inspire devotion in others." This worked both ways for Ali. He was the funny, witty, boxer that mesmerized crowds and made rooms of people laugh, and he was also the outspoken, brutally honest, combative, man from Louisville who fought for change. There was a fine line. He had his trademark raps and he would go on and on about beating his opponent, but there were very serious undertones within those jokes. He had rage. It was evident when he famously beat Ernie Terrell within an inch of his life while taunting him by screaming, "Say my name" to him throughout the bout. It was all because Terrell wouldn't address Ali by his Muslim name, instead calling him by his given name, Cassius Clay. There is no doubt rage played a large role in Muhammad's success while giving fuel to many of his critics.

Ali was able to use his charisma, combined with sincerity and knowledge of his beliefs to get his point across. His speeches focus on serious issues. Although his language is strong, he presents his arguments in a way that are non-threatening and hopeful for peace. Most of Ali's controversial remarks have come via his interactions with the media, not necessarily through his collegiate speech tour where his message was very controlled and specific. It shows a difference between Ali's speeches and his interviews with the media in terms of his delivery, but his message always stays the same. He continuously falls back on his religious beliefs which give him a solid foundation for his rhetoric. When he addressed congregations, particularly the predominantly white ones, he was successful in talking about any topic that was on his mind

without alienating or insulting his audience, all without caving on any of his beliefs, due to his charisma and sincerity. He was able to subdue his rage in times where it must have been extremely difficult.

Another question that is always posed when dissecting a piece of historical rhetoric is, "Why is this important?" When researching Ali and analyzing his speech, I came to the conclusion that it's important on every level; from a rhetorical standpoint, a historical standpoint, a sports historian standpoint and a civil rights standpoint. Ali encompassed so many characteristics that probably no other athlete besides Jackie Robinson ever approached. Ali transcended sports. He was a larger than life figure. He also wasn't just some athlete running his mouth like many of his critics thought he was earlier in his career. He represented a generation, a race, and a time in American history, and that's just the big picture. His words are important as well.

In the world of social media and 24-hour sports coverage, athletes are constantly under a microscope. I would love to have seen Muhammad Ali with a Twitter page, typing out his thoughts to the world whenever he had the urge. Ali set the standard for the athlete and the idea of self-promotion. Ali's words will live on forever, much like the memories of his famous bouts and catch phrases. It's important to understand how vital Ali was to the time and how much of an imprint he left on history. And he did it with his words, just as much as he did with his fists.

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