

Chapter 2

What if Muhammad Ali did not conscientiously object the Vietnam War?

Jon Cockrill and Clive Palmer

Research Preface

MUHAMMAD ALI WAS BORN CASSIUS CLAY on January 17th 1942 in Louisville Kentucky. He took up boxing at the age of 12, six years later he was winning light-heavyweight gold at the Rome Olympics in 1960 (Hauser, 2004: 190). Shortly after his Olympic success Clay turned pro, quickly amassing a 19 fight unbeaten record in just under three years. The run included technical knockouts against Archie Moore and Henry Cooper, and earned him a world title shot against Sonny Liston, his twentieth opponent (Boxrec.com, 2009).

Clay went on to defeat Sonny Liston in Miami in February 1964, when the champion did not return from his corner at the beginning of the seventh round. It was after this fight that Clay announced he was a member of the Nation of Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. The Nation of Islam at the time was also called The Black Muslims which was a sect of the Islamic faith. It is claimed by Ali that he had been attending Nation of Islam meetings in secret for three years previous, in fear that he would not have got a shot at the world title if it were common knowledge that he was a member. This was seemingly not a good move for him to make at the time with regard to his relations with 'White America', as Hauser, (2004: 81) points out, "Before 1964, it seemed as though almost everything Cassius

Clay did, fitted within the context of establishment white values. He wasn't white, but he was the next best thing".

Hauser (2004) points out that it is widely claimed that the Nation of Islam used Ali as a public relations tool, despite at the time Ali being treated with suspicion from many sectors of American society because of his religious stance. Ali was influential because he seemed to be able to reach out and connect with a wider demographic of American society because of his sporting achievements and status. Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam's leader, claimed Ali's win over Sonny Liston as "a victory for Islam" – [interestingly] having refused to support him publicly before the fight, believing that Ali would lose (Telegraph.co.uk, 1999).

In the early 60s, the United States found themselves becoming more involved in the Vietnam War. In 1964 Ali was not eligible for the armed forces as his reading and writing skills were sub-standard. However in 1966, with the Americans increasing troop levels in Vietnam at an alarming rate towards their peak in 1968, the bar for academic ability was lowered, meaning Ali was suitable for draft. Between the years 1964 and 1968, General William Westmoreland was the commanding officer of all American troops in Vietnam. In these four years he saw his troop numbers rise from 16,000 to their peak 535,000, under the presidency of Lyndon Johnson (Hickman, 2001).

Ali declared himself a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War when he was notified of his status to be called up for draft. He claimed that the war was against the teachings of the Qur'an, and that as a Muslim he was not obliged to take part in Christian wars or any war that has not been declared by Allah. It was also in 1966 that Ali famously said, "I ain't got a quarrel with the Viet Cong. No Vietnamese ever called me a nigger". The statement became the unofficial motto of Ali's objection, with him claiming that he had stronger enemies amongst the racist white Americans, as opposed to the communist North Vietnamese soldiers. In April 1967 Ali refused to step forward from the line in a recruitment parade to join the U.S. Armed forces. Three times he was requested to step forward at this induction in Houston. Three times he refused. The attending officers reminded him that should he refuse the draft he could face a \$10,000 fine and five years imprisonment. Once again he refused to step forward and as a result he was arrested and stripped of his title and suspended by the New York State Athletic Commission.

Ali was found guilty of being a conscientious objector a few months later, although it was upheld through the Court of Appeals and then passed on to the Supreme Court where the case was eventually heard in June 1971, and the conviction was reversed. Ali had been somewhat lucky that in the four years between his arrest and final hearing, the public opinion of the war in Vietnam had dipped a great deal. He was not permitted to fight and spent much of his time speaking at colleges and rallies, gaining back the popularity he enjoyed in the early stages of his career. He said at a college campus, "I'm expected to go overseas to help free people in South Vietnam, and at the same time my people are being brutalized and mistreated" (Hauser, 2004: 187).

The 'angle for the creative story is drawn from the experiences of Bob Hope (1903-2003) who is the most famous figure from American show business that had an effect on the military. Despite never actually being a member of the armed forces, Hope was named an Honorary Veteran by US congress for his stage performances for the United Services Organizations that saw him entertain troops during World War Two, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and more recently the Gulf War. His Christmas specials that he filmed in Vietnam in 1970 and '71 remain in the top 30 highest viewed prime time telecasts in U.S. history (Anton, 2008).

Had Muhammad Ali reversed his objection to fight in Vietnam and joined the U.S. Armed Forces, it is doubtful his role would have been solely that of a soldier on the front line. At the time, in the 1960s, the heavyweight champion of the world was the most important man in sport and the fact he was fighting against communism in the Vietnam War would have been used as a propaganda tool. Similarly, Joe Louis was used to the same effect during the Second World War. Joe enlisted in the U.S. Armed forces and fought exhibition bouts throughout his service to strengthen the morale and fighting spirit of the troops. This would have probably been the case for Ali, As Lemert (2003: 113) points out, "Ali would have had an 'easy' life in the army compared to the other servicemen. He would have been able to box during the years of his finest athletic skills".

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Creative Story

What if Muhammad Ali had not conscientiously objected the Vietnam War?

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THE CHAMP WAS BEING USHERED ALONG a lengthy hollow corridor. The slender nature of the passage and the size of his frame meant the two Lieutenants either side of him were struggling to remain in control. They reached the end of the corridor and the smaller of the two junior officers anxiously manoeuvred his forearm around the Champ's midriff and opened the door to his right before hastily taking a step back, letting the door open on its own.

General William Westmoreland sat in a green leather chair behind a sturdy looking mahogany desk. As he raised his head to acknowledge his visitors, a somewhat starstruck look adorned his face. He quickly rectified his lapse in authority and stared somewhat harshly at the man in front of him, who was blocking what little light the corridor behind him had to offer. "General, Sir," the small Lieutenant announced loudly in a typical US militaristic fashion, "Mr Ali, as you requested". He dropped his salute from his temple with the speed and precision of a Samurai Warrior and stared through his General, awaiting recognition and further instructions. "That will be all, Lieutenant," Westmoreland said calmly, slightly tired of the noisy protocol which the Army seems to think reasonable for personnel entering and exiting an office. Barely acknowledging the Lieutenant's presence as he dismissed him, he turned his admiring gaze on the champ, "Step inside Mr Ali, take a seat".

The Champ stepped further into the room, he inhaled deeply through his nose as he sat opposite Westmoreland, his mouth closed, his eyes fixed on his opponent. The General tried to maintain his stare back, but to no avail.

He looked towards a corner table. On it was a crystal decanter and several matching tumblers.

“Would you care for a scotch, Mr Ali?” Westmoreland said as he stood from his chair and began walking towards the table.

The Champ’s glare turned into a look of amused disbelief, “Now Willy, why would you be so dumb to ask me a thing like that?” he said as he turned to the General who by now had began pouring a fair sized measure into his glass, “I don’t drink, I don’t gamble, and I sure as hell don’t ride no helicopter in the jungle for you, Willy”.

The General looked down at his glass and took a good mouthful of Blue Label. He hadn’t been called “Willy” since basic training, when he had no one under him and everyone on top, it was different now. There were the best part of half a million men in Vietnam and he sat on top of them all. Despite this however he was struggling to gain any mental control over the man that sat before him. “You ain’t going to be in no chopper, Mr Ali” the General said, changing the tone of his voice to a friendly, persuasive, reassuring tone, “hell, you ain’t going to be on no battlefield”.

“You’re right I’m not, thank you for your understanding Willy,” interrupted the Champ as he rose to his feet and turned to the door.

“God damn it, Mr Ali, get the hell back in that chair” the General shouted, immediately regretting his aggressive response, he breathed in and calmly continued, “if you walk out of this room, you will be arrested as fast as Sonny Liston hits the deck these days. You’ll be detained by the Houston District Attorney’s Office, who will see that you never fight again *and* see you good for a five year stretch in the can”. Westmoreland had moved back behind his desk, leaning over with his fists supporting his straight arms. He nodded towards the chair, “Now sit back down, Mr Ali. I guarantee you it is in your interest”.

The Champ turned back towards Westmoreland, standing behind his chair mirroring his opponent’s stance, “I’m all ears, Willy,” as he moved his outstretched arms from the back of the chair, the furniture almost seemed to breathe a sigh of relief from the strain it had been put under, the Champ moved round and parked himself back in the seat, “Come on Willy, let’s hear it”.

Westmoreland had sat down, he looked nervous, uncomfortable, his hands were clasped together with each index finger elongated and pressed against his lips, his forehead creased with a concentrated frown, pondering his opening line. He began, "You're at the top of your game, Mr Ali. Why in God's name would you want this ride that you're on come to an end?" Westmoreland's uncomfortable look had developed into a grimace, "I know the Nation of Islam have got you in their pocket".

"I ain't in the pocket of nobody" the Champ interrupted sharply, looking up to the framed photograph of President Johnson on the wall behind Westmoreland. He continued, "if one of us is in the pocket of anyone, I'd say it's you, Willy".

Westmoreland leaned forward, the irritation of being called Willy was starting to grate and it showed on his face, "Well you're welcome to your opinion Mr Ali, let us say for argument's sake that we're both inside pockets, because Elijah Muhammad's pretty god-damn insignificant when compared to that of the god-damn president"! Westmoreland banged his fist on the leather lined desk with a thud.

"You may believe that to be the case, but I am not fighting no war for no white boy, in his White House, and if he's got any sense, his white flag." The Champ felt antagonised by Westmoreland's behaviour, waving his finger before saying, "I've said it once before, aint no Viet Cong....."

".....ever called me nigger." Westmoreland interrupted, and sat back in his chair weighing up whether stopping the Champ mid sentence in such a way, and using such a word when he was in such a mood, was a good move. "It's a good line Mr Ali, got people talking, and thinking. But it sure as hell ain't good enough to keep you here. I've got several hundred thousand Negroes in Vietnam, all fighting for the cause of the United States".

"And what if I don't *care* for the *cause* of the United States, Willy?" the Champ responded quickly.

"Well what if the United States didn't care for the cause of the Nation of Islam, Mr Ali?" Replied Westmoreland, as he lent back anticipating the Champ's next move.

"I think that it's pretty clear that you already don't, so don't you threaten me, Willy". A sneer had adorned the face of the Champ, he pointed towards Westmoreland, whose anxiety had faded into a sense of arrogant comfort.

"Oh no, we don't. We don't care for your practices, your views or beliefs, or the shit you spill out to pothead hippies in Colleges around the country. The Nation of Islam just isn't enough of a worry to us to give a damn about". Westmoreland leaned further forward across the desk, his stare was uninterrupted, looking up towards the Champ's eyes, "The thing is Mr Ali, we can nip this Nation of Islam thing in the bud, we can take away *your* voice and with it, *its* voice, you got to remember who has got the bigger pockets, Mr Ali". Westmoreland reached to his tumbler of Blue Label, as he drank he glared towards the Champ, his insides bustling with adrenaline.

"You can't shut us down, Willy."

"Oh I can shut you down and unless you go to Vietnam I will. I have enough pull in the Senate. Hell, I play golf with half the members of Congress. Mr Ali you have to go to Vietnam, and if you don't, well I'll see to it that the Nation of Islam is no more". At last Westmoreland felt empowered, he had the Champ where he wanted him and could feel the cogs ticking and the engine whirring beneath his scalp.

The Champ raised his head, his mood was evidently lower than it had been at any point during this meeting with Westmoreland. "Willy," he said, "if I get on a plane to Vietnam, I will mean nothing to the Nation of Islam for getting involved in your crazy war".

"Yeah, yeah... but you could be a martyr and your people love a martyr don't they. You go to Vietnam, you save the Nation of Islam from a great deal of hardship from the American government. Can you see the deal? We're fighting god-damn communism here. When all this is over you can come clean. You publish memoirs. This doesn't mean you lose, Mr Ali."

"I don't lose? You're absolutely right I don't lose." The Champ rose to his feet, inhaling as he stretched to his full height and, whilst sneering across at Westmoreland he pointed and said, "I'll let the people know one day, Willy. I'm going to be around for a long time, Willy. When all this is over with them Viet Cong I'll be sure that everyone knows."

Westmoreland held his palms aloft in gracious acceptance of the Champ's intentions, "Alright then Mr Ali, we have a deal then. You'll begin basic training and look to complete an 18 month stint with the U.S. Armed Forces" he leaned forward to reason with the Champ, "you ain't going to be shooting no Viet Cong and they ain't going to get close to you either. You're America's most valuable sporting asset. With you out there the troops will feel like the Heavyweight Champ of the World is there fighting alongside them. A show of strength in the enemy's back yard will help the boys be brave, just like you are in the ring Champ. Your only responsibility is to put on a couple of shows, just like Joe Louis did, damn I'm not asking you to be Bob Hope."

"You play golf with Bob Hope too, Willy?" The Champ asked, mocking Westmoreland's self righteous sense of importance.

"Oh of course," replied Westmoreland accentuating his answer to play along with the Champ's accusation, he placed his index and thumb together on the side of his trouser and sarcastically said, "Me, you, Bob Hope and half a million Americans, we're all in the same pocket now, Mr Ali."

The Champ on his feet, had a defeated look on his face, an unusual feeling for Ali. Westmoreland stood and called in his Lieutenant, "Take Private Ali to Staff Sergeant Miller, Lieutenant". He said before pouring the remains of his Blue Label into his mouth.