

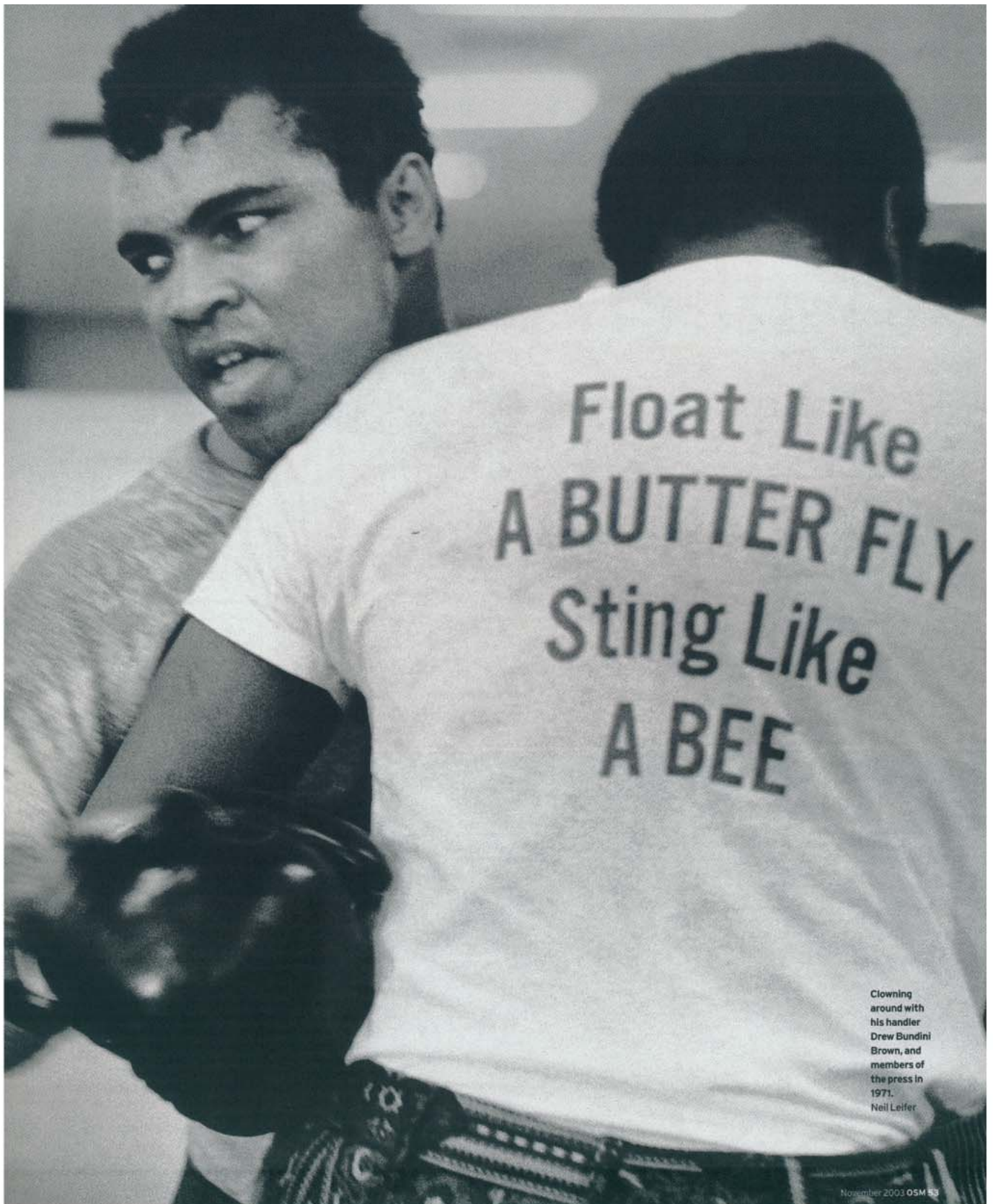
**ALI:  
THE LEGACY**  
BY THOMAS HAUSER

# THE LIVING FLAME

Once reviled for his radical politics, Ali is today an icon of corporate America, famous for being famous. But rather than ignoring the truth about his past, we should cherish the memory of him as a warrior and as a gleaming symbol against an unjust social order



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Clowning  
around with  
his handier  
Drew Bundini  
Brown, and  
members of  
the press in  
1971.  
Neil Leifer

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**P**eople today understand that Muhammad Ali defied the US government and alienated mainstream America because he stood up for his principles. But they often don't know what those principles were. Generally, they are aware that, after beating Sonny Liston to capture the world heavyweight championship in 1964, Clay announced that he had accepted the teachings of a religion known as the Nation of Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. Thereafter, he became a lightning rod for dissent throughout America and refused induction into the US Army during the height of the war in Vietnam.

But to younger generations the Ali of today is famous primarily for being famous. There has been a deliberate distortion of what he once believed, said, and stood for. History is being rewritten to serve political, social and economic ends. Thus, it's important to revisit the Ali who, in the words of author Dave Kindred, was 'as near to living flame as a man can get'.

In the early 1960s, when Ali first entered the public consciousness, sport was considered one of the few areas where black Americans could compete on equal footing with whites. But, in reality, sport reflected the old order. Black athletes could become stars, but only within guidelines dictated by the establishment. And away from the playing fields, as Ali himself once noted, 'many coloured people thought it was better to be white'. Black Americans were scorned, demeaned and denied even self-love.

In 1961, Cassius Clay met a man called Sam Saxon. Saxon was one of a small group of adherents (known to the media as 'Black Muslims') who attended Nation of Islam meetings at a Miami temple and followed the black separatist teachings of a self-proclaimed 'messenger' called Elijah Muhammad. Clay accepted Saxon's invitation to attend a Nation of Islam service and thereafter was indoctrinated with the tenets of the religion.

The Nation of Islam taught that white people were devils who had been genetically created by an evil scientist with a large head named Mr Yacub. It maintained there was a wheel-shaped, half-mile wide 'Mother of Planes' manned by black men in the sky and that, on Allah's chosen day of retribution, 1,500 planes from this Mother of Planes would drop deadly explosives destroying all but the righteous on earth. Neither of these views is part of traditional Islamic thought or finds justification in the Koran. Moreover, while the concepts of Heaven and Hell are central to traditional Islamic doctrine, the Nation of Islam rejected both.

From 1964 through his conversion to orthodox Islam in 1975, Muhammad Ali was the Nation of Islam's most visible and vocal spokesman in America. Nation of Islam teachings were at the core of who he was at that time in his life. Among the positions Ali preached were:

On integration: 'We who follow the

**THE HUMAN TOUCH**

**Top:** Relaxing at home with his children in 1972. Neil Leifer

**Bottom:** At the Black Muslim Annual Convention in Chicago, 1968. Howard Bingham



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teachings of Elijah Muhammad don't want to be forced to integrate. Integration is wrong. We don't want to live with the white man; that's all.'

On intermarriage: 'No intelligent black man or black woman in his or her right black mind wants white boys and white girls coming to their homes to marry their black sons and daughters.'

On the need for a separate black homeland: 'Why don't we get out and build our own nation? White people just don't want their slaves to be free. That's the whole thing. Why not let us go and build ourselves a nation? We want a country. We're 40 million people, but we'll never be free until we own our own land.'

On brotherhood: 'We're not all brothers. You can say we're brothers, but we're not.'

Ali was black and proud of it at a time when many black Americans were running from their colour. 'He lived a lot of lives for a lot of people,' said social activist Dick Gregory. 'And he was able to tell white folks, for us, to "Go to hell."'

The establishment media – and sports-writers in particular – came down hard on Ali. Jim Murray of the *Los Angeles Times* labelled him the 'white man's burden'. Jimmy Cannon of the *New York Journal-American* called Ali's ties to the Nation of Islam 'the dirtiest in American sports since the Nazis were shouting for Max Schmeling as representative of their vile theories of blood'.

A lot of white liberals and black Americans also took issue with Ali. 'I never

went along with the pronouncements of Elijah Muhammad that the white man was the devil and that blacks should be striving for separate development; a sort of American apartheid,' said Arthur Ashe. 'That never made sense to me. It was a racist ideology and I didn't like it.'

Joe Louis added his voice to those opposing Ali and opined: 'I've always believed that every man is my brother. Clay will

here to hate one another. Cassius Clay is disgracing himself and the Negro race.'

Still, whether or not one liked what Ali represented, it was clear his demand for full entitlement for all black people was on the cutting edge of an era. 'I'm no leader; I'm a little humble follower,' Ali said. But to many he was the ultimate symbol of black pride and resistance to an unjust social order.

Ali broke the mould. When he appeared

as non-threatening as possible. White Americans were told: 'All that black people want is what you want for yourselves. We're appealing to your conscience.'

Then along came Ali, preaching something very different from mainstream values. Outside the ring, he was never violent. His threat to the status quo was one of ideas, which is ironic because he himself was never a 'thinker'.

The civil rights movement and Ali as a fighter both peaked in the mid-1960s. Then the war in Vietnam intervened. In 1964, Ali had been classified 1-Y (not qualified for military service) as a result of scoring poorly on a Selective Service mental aptitude examination. Then, in early 1966, with the war expanding and manpower needs growing, the test score required for induction into the armed forces was lowered, leaving him eligible for the draft. Ali requested a deferment but, on 17 February 1966, his request was denied and he was reclassified 1-A (available for the draft). Several hours later, a frustrated Ali blurted out to reporters: 'I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong.' The following day, his outburst was front-page news across the country and the sporting press raged against him.

Ali wasn't a political thinker. His initial concern over being drafted wasn't religious or political. It was that of a 24-year-old who thought he had put the draft behind him and then learned he was in danger of having his life turned upside down.

Later, however, on 28 April 1967, citing

**THIS MAN HELPED  
GIVE AN ENTIRE  
PEOPLE THE WILL TO  
MAKE THEMSELVES  
BETTER**  
ARTHUR ASHE, THE FIRST BLACK MAN TO WIN WIMBLEDON

earn the public's hatred because of his connections with the Black Muslims.'

Former heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson concurred with Louis, declaring: 'I've been told that Clay has every right to follow any religion he chooses and I agree. But, by the same token, I have every right to call the Black Muslims a menace to the United States and a menace to the Negro race. I do not believe God put us

on the scene, it was popular among those in the vanguard of the civil rights movement to take the 'safe' path. That path wasn't safe for those who participated in the struggle. Martin Luther King Jr, Medgar Evers, Viola Liuzzo and other courageous men and women were subjected to violence and sometimes death when they carried the struggle 'too far'. But the road they travelled was designed to be

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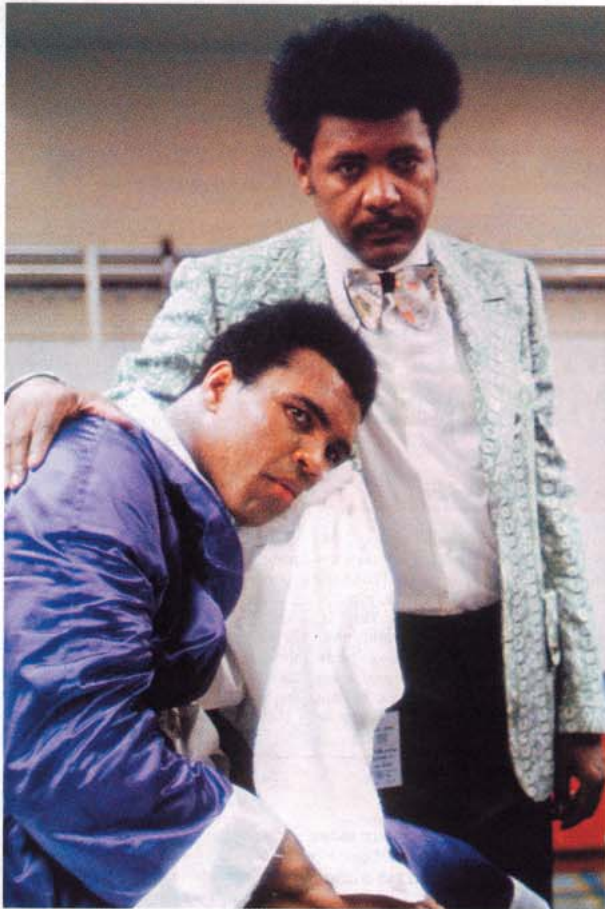
1. Pick your sides e.g Whopper v All Black Flame Grilled Burger.
2. Place the cartons 100 cm apart. (Budding Wilkinsons can increase the distance.)
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OSM ALI: THE LEGACY



CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Don King consoles Ali after his points defeat to Ken Norton in 1973. The deposed champion had his jaw broken during the fight. Neil Leifer

his religious beliefs, Ali refused induction into the United States Army. 'Clay seems to have gone past the borders of faith,' Milton Gross wrote in the *New York Post*. 'He has reached the boundaries of fanaticism.'

Less than eight weeks later, on 20 June, Ali was convicted of refusing induction into the armed forces and sentenced to five years in prison. He was stripped of his title and precluded by state athletic commissions throughout the country from fighting. His 'exile' from boxing lasted for more than three years.

Vietnam deflected attention from Ali's racial views and put him in a context where many whites and white opinion-makers could identify with him. There had been an ugly mood around Ali, starting with the assassination of Malcolm X in February 1965. Thereafter, Ali seemed to take on a bit of the persona, not just the ideology, of the Nation of Islam. But when the spotlight turned from Ali's acceptance of an ideology that sanctioned hate to his refusal to accept induction into the US Army, he began to bond with the white liberal community, which at the time was quite strong.

Thus it was that Ali was martyred and lived to talk about it. Ultimately, he returned to boxing. After wins against Jerry Quarry and Oscar Bonavena, he lost a historic 15-round decision to Joe Frazier at Madison Square Garden. Then his conviction for refusing induction into the army was reversed by the US Supreme Court on a procedural technicality. After that, Ali reeled off 10 more victories but suffered a broken jaw in a 12-round loss to Ken Norton. That made him an 'underdog' in the eyes of America. People who had once bristled at his words and conduct began to feel sorry for him.

Ali earned a measure of revenge against Frazier and Norton with victories in hard-fought rematches. Then, on 30 October 1974, he dethroned George Foreman to recapture the heavyweight championship of the world. But, more importantly, America had by that time turned against the war in Vietnam. It was clear that Ali had made enormous sacrifices for his beliefs. And, whether or not people liked the racial component of Ali's views, there was respect for the fact that he had stood by them.

Today Ali is a living embodiment of Martin Luther King Jr's message that all people are deserving of love. As Jerry Izenberg, one of America's foremost sports journalists, observed: 'Ironically, after all he went through, the affection for Ali is largely colour-blind. Late in his career, he developed a quality that only a few people have. He reached a point where, when people looked at him, they didn't see black or white. They saw Ali. For a long time, that mystified him. He expected black people to love him and crowd around him, but then he realised white people loved him too; and that made him very happy.'

Ali's love affair with America and the

world reached its zenith in 1996. Fifteen years earlier, his public profile had dropped after his retirement from boxing. Thereafter, if Ali appeared at an event, those in attendance were excited but he wasn't on the national radar screen. Then Ali was chosen to light the Olympic flame in Atlanta. It was a glorious moment. Three billion people around the world watched on television and were united by love and caring for one man.

But some think that the 1996 Olympics carried negatives as well, because it was in Atlanta that corporate America 'rediscovered' Ali. And since then there has been a determined effort to rewrite history. In order to take advantage of Ali's economic potential, it has been deemed desirable to 'sanitise' him. And, as a result, all the 'rough edges' are being filed away from Ali's life story.

No event crystallised the commercialisation of Ali more clearly than his appearance at the New York Stock Exchange on 31 December 1999. That was an important day. By most reckonings, it marked the end of a millennium. The Ali who won hearts in the 1960s could have been expected to celebrate the occasion at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter to draw attention to the plight of the disadvantaged. Many hoped to see Ali spend 31 December 1999 in a spiritual setting. Instead, the man who decades earlier was a beacon of hope for oppressed people around the globe and who refused to become a symbol for the US Army became a symbol for the New York Stock Exchange.

As the clock struck midnight, Ali was in Washington DC, dining on beluga caviar, lobster, and foie gras. That saddened a lot of people. Ali makes his own decisions, but those decisions are based on how information is presented to him. One can be forgiven for thinking that, had the options been explained differently to him, he would have chosen to serve as a different symbol that day. Thirty months later, that theme repeated itself when Ali was asked about al-Qaeda by David Frost during a televised interview. 'I dodge those questions,' Ali answered. 'I've opened up businesses across the country, selling products and I don't want to say nothing and, not knowing what I'm doing, not being qualified, say the wrong thing and hurt my business.' It's hard to imagine Muhammad Ali in the 1960s withholding comment on the war in Vietnam for fear of jeopardising his business interests.

'One of the many paradoxes about Ali,' says historian Randy Roberts, 'is that he embraced an ideology that disparaged white people; yet he was never cruel to white people, only blacks. Except for occasional humorous barbs, Ali's white opponents were treated with dignity and respect. But things got ugly with Floyd Patterson, Ernie Terrell and Joe Frazier. And sure, Patterson and Terrell might have asked for it because of things they said. But Joe was innocent. And to deny the cruelty of what Ali did to Joe Frazier is to continue to be cruel to Joe.'

In truth, it takes a certain amount of cruelty to be a great fighter. Let's not

HOW DOES IT FEEL TO KNOCK DOWN ALI?

Henry Cooper recalls knocking down the then Cassius Clay at Wembley Stadium in June 1963:

'I caught Ali with a clean left hook in the fourth round, one of the best I'd ever thrown. As the punch connected, I could see that he was gone. In boxing, the eyes tell you everything and I could see the whites of his. It was a shame that he wasn't in the centre of the ring because as he went down the ropes broke his fall. Then, of course, the bell came to his rescue. It was the first time that anyone had knocked Ali down and I remember thinking how lucky the bell was for him, because when I had people in trouble in those days I always finished them off. But I didn't have chance because his trainer, Angelo Dundee, was a shrewd man and stuck his nails into Ali's glove to rip it and cause a delay.

I remember sitting in my corner wondering what was going on. I hadn't been



surprised that he went down. I'd fancied my chances because I suspected that he wouldn't like my style. He was flash, but people forget that he had great heart in the ring.

Ali has since said that I hit him so hard that when he hit the ground his relations could feel it reverberating in Africa, which is a rather nice line, I think.'

**OSM ALI: THE LEGACY**

forget that Ali beat people up and inflicted brain damage on them as his livelihood and way of life for years. And the time when he was at his peak as a fighter coincided with the time when he was most openly angry at the circumstances he found.

Jeffrey Sammons, a professor of history at New York University and author of *Beyond The Ring: the Role of Boxing in American Society*, says: 'What's happening to Ali now is typical of what has happened to so many black figures. It's a commodification and a trivialisation. Maybe the idea is that, by embracing Ali as a society, we can feel good about having become more tolerant.'

Ali's legacy today is in danger of being protected in the same manner as the estate of Elvis Presley is protecting Elvis's

**I'M STILL STANDING**

Working the heavy bag at his gym in Berrien Springs, 2001. Neil Leifer

**I'VE GOT PARKINSON'S. THEY THOUGHT I WAS SUPERMAN. NOW THEY CAN SAY 'HE'S HUMAN, LIKE US'**

MUHAMMAD ALI, 1988

image. New generations are born; and to them Ali is more legend than reality, part of America's distant past.

Ali in the 1960s stood for the proposition that principles matter; that equality among people is just and proper; that the war in Vietnam was wrong. Every time he looked in the mirror and preened: 'I'm so pretty,' he was saying: 'Black is

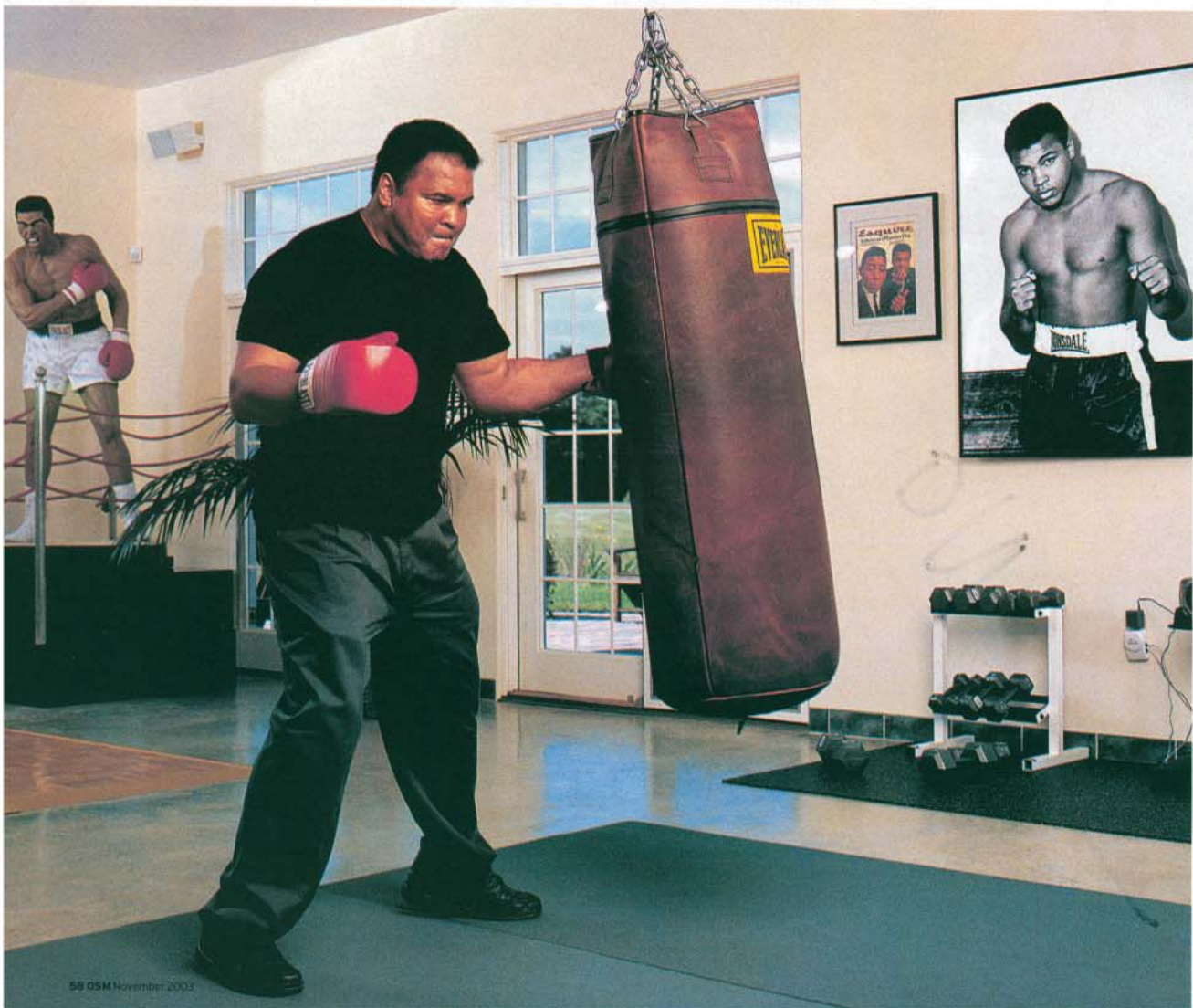
beautiful,' before it became fashionable to do so. Ali's role in spreading that pride has been testified to by others. This man helped give an entire people a belief in themselves and the will to make themselves better,' said Arthur Ashe.

In sum, the experience of being black changed for millions of men and women because of Ali. But one of the reasons Ali

had the impact he did was because there was an ugly edge to what he said. And by focusing on Ali's ring exploits and his refusal to serve in Vietnam, while at the same time covering up the true nature of Nation of Islam doctrine, the current keepers of Ali's legacy are losing sight of why he so enthralled and enraged segments of American society.

Ali stood up for his convictions and sacrificed a great deal for them. So why hide the true nature of what his principles were?

Great men are considered great, not only because of what they achieve, but also because of the road they travel to reach their final destination. Sanitising Muhammad Ali and rounding off the rough edges of his journey are a disservice both to history and to Ali himself. Rather than cultivate historical amnesia, we should cherish the memory of Ali as a warrior and as a gleaming symbol of defiance against an unjust social order when he was young. **OSM**



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