

Muhammad Ali: The Brand and the Man

by Dave Zirin [posted on the Nation online on January 17, 2007]

*Some people thought I was a hero. Some people said that what I did was wrong. But everything I did was according to my conscience. I made a stand all people, not just black people, should have thought about making, because it wasn't just black people being drafted. The government had a system where the rich man's son went to college, and the poor man's son went to war. **Muhammad Ali***

Muhammad Ali celebrated his 65th birthday this week, and the tributes are reading like love letters from besotted tweens. ESPN alone has dedicated a stream of programming, including one special called [Ali Rap](#), which contends the great boxing champion actually invented rap music. (No truth to the rumor that ESPN is also producing *Ali's Astrophysics*, which contends that he, not Isaac Newton, first posited the inverse-square law of universal gravitation.)

This rush to adulation comes with an unprecedented push by Ali's business agents to market him as a modern-day Elvis. The Champ, who now suffers from Parkinson's disease and dementia, last year made a deal with [CKX Inc.](#) for \$50 million. CKX Inc. is the same company that put Presley's image on velvet paintings and commemorative shot glasses around the world.

CKX Inc. marked The Champ's birthday with the release of a new line of snack foods bearing his likeness. With names such as "Rumble," "Shuffle" and "Jabs" and flavors such as "Fruit Fight," "Thrill-A-Dill-A" and "Slammin' Salsa," the snacks will target college students across the country. The 18-to-24 set is the perfect demographic for Ali, according to Charles Sharp, professor of marketing at the University of Louisville. As Sharp told the Associated Press, young students are ideal since market research shows they know "the Ali brand" but are unaware of his early years as an unrepentant black nationalist and resister to the war in Vietnam.

"They're going to remember the media-spun image of Ali, which is mostly positive," Sharp said.

The irony of this repellent spectacle is that as the Ali brand grows in stature, his all-but-forgotten history as a war resister could not be more relevant. Today Iraq is the new Vietnam, with words and phrases like "quagmire," "body bags" and "civilian death tolls" returning to the national lexicon. At such a moment remembering the actual Ali becomes a question of salvaging a past that can offer a challenge to the horrors of the present.

Muhammad Ali's brilliance was not that he was some kind of antiwar prophet. He wasn't Malcolm X or Martin Luther King Jr. in boxing gloves, debating foreign policy between rounds. But unlike the Ivy League advisers who made up the "best and brightest," Ali understood then that there was justice and injustice, right and wrong. He knew that not

taking a stand could be as political a statement as taking one. This was Ali's code, and he never wavered.

In early 1966 the US Army came calling for Ali, and he was classified 1-A for the draft. He got the news surrounded by reporters and blurted one of the most famous phrases of the decade, "Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong."

This was an astounding statement. As Mike Marqusee outlines in his *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the 60s*, there was little opposition to the war at the time. The antiwar movement was in its infancy, and most of the country still stood behind the President. *Life* magazine's cover read, "Vietnam: The War Is Worth Winning." The song "Ballad of the Green Berets" was climbing the charts. And then there was Ali. As longtime peace activist Daniel Berrigan said, "It was a major boost to an antiwar movement that was very white. He was not an academic or a bohemian or a clergyman. He couldn't be dismissed as cowardly."

Ali could have recanted, apologized, or signed up on some cushy USO gig boxing for the troops and the cameras, ultimately to go back to making money. But he refused. At one press conference later that year, he was expected to apologize for his "un-American" remarks. Instead he said, "Keep asking me, no matter how long. On the war in Vietnam, I sing this song, I ain't got no quarrel with the Vietcong. Clean out my cell and take my tail to jail. 'Cause better to be in jail fed than to be in Vietnam dead."

Ali's position gave courage to people around the country to stand up and be heard. In 1967, over the objections of many supporters in the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King came out against the war. In his initial statements, he said, "Like Muhammad Ali puts it, we are all--black and brown and poor--victims of the same system of oppression."

Ali was stripped of his title, costing him millions of dollars. He was given a five-year prison sentence, which was later overturned on appeal.

In a Toronto gym, sportswriter Jerry Izenberg asked Ali whether he might try to stay in Canada. Ali said, "Of course I'm going home. The United States is my birth country. People can't chase me out of my birth country. I believe what I believe, and you know what that is. If I have to go to jail, I'll do it, but I'm not leaving my country to live in Canada."

As the corrupt boxing world strove to fill the now-vacant title, protesters appeared outside the bouts with placards reading, "Hell No, We Ain't Goin'" and "Fight Racism, Free Muhammad Ali."

Ali himself said, "Everybody knows I'm the champion. My ghost will haunt all the arenas. I'll be there, wearing a sheet and whispering, 'Ali-e-e-e! Ali-e-e-e!'"

Today, as Ali's handlers turn the man into a vendor of snack food, while hundreds of thousands die in an unspeakably immoral war, I pray that the ghost of the Ali of old

returns to haunt us once again. I hope late at night in the White House, as Bush gets up for some "pretzels," a sharp breeze tickles and then sings the back of his neck, the breeze becoming a whipping wind as the words whisper: "Ali-e-e-e! Ali-e-e-e!"