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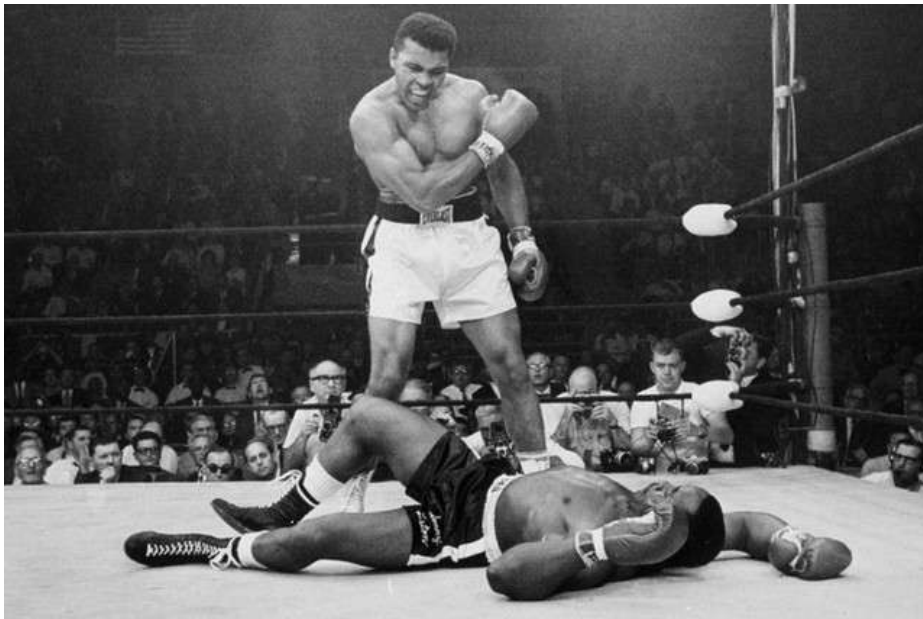
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## Muhammad Ali's cultural legacy will be long

June 4, 2016



Muhammad Ali stands over challenger Sonny Liston in Lewiston, Maine, in 1965

Even now, exactly fifty years on, it can be hard to understand the magnitude of Muhammad Ali's most revolutionary act. The boxer, who died on Friday at the age of 74, had been a public figure for most of his life, ever since he won an Olympic medal at the age of 18. But of all the fights he won, and the surprising things he said, his most radical act was to defy the US government, and public opinion, by opposing the Vietnam War.

In 1966, the Vietnam War was still popular in America, as was the boxer who had only recently converted to Islam and given up the name Cassius Clay. By refusing to be drafted – as he memorably put it, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong" – he directly took on the US establishment, with devastating effects to his career. This was a time when African-Americans still struggled for acceptance and rights – Martin Luther King's famous speech was only a few years old – and Ali went to court repeatedly to avoid the war. Within a year his political stance saw him arrested and stripped of all boxing licences.

It is worth remembering that incident as the obituaries pour in. Ali lost years of his boxing career – he finally fought again in 1970 – but remained firm in his convictions. It is difficult to imagine any modern sportsperson tackling divisive politics that way.

But that was Muhammad Ali. In a life spent in the public eye, he never shied away from controversy. Much has been made of his quips and his arrogance, but they were mere theatre. On real issues that mattered – civil rights and race relations, issues of class in America, foreign affairs – Ali spoke without guile and without political correctness. Most important, he spoke without deference, an attitude that some parts of the US found difficult to deal with from an African-American.

America's foreign wars, its problems with race and its suspicion of Islam have not gone away. Today, the conversion of a sportsperson of his stature to Islam would be big news. In recent years, Ali has been less and less in the public eye, a consequence of his long fight with Parkinson's disease. Even in that battle, his toughest yet and the one that ultimately contributed to his death, he has exhibited a quiet dignity that have introduced him to a whole new generation of fans.

It would be glib to say he was the greatest ever. But Muhammad Ali was certainly a rare and special sportsman, a towering cultural icon and a man who transcended his sport, his race and his country. Ever the contrarian, he would, at least, have agreed with that.