

# RECONSTRUCTION

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## Muhammad Ali: The Boxer as Dissident

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## I.

He entered America's consciousness in the late summer of 1960. He is still there today.

In 1960, at eighteen, in the midst of the Cold War, he symbolically defeated the Communist bloc, beating first a Soviet, then a Pole to win the gold medal in heavyweight boxing at the Rome Olympics. He conquered, and captivated with speed that was his shield and his sword; never had a fighter so big fought so fast. Today, at 52, he moves more slowly than most septuagenarians. Then he had an excitable face with a flashing smile. Today the face stays blank, except for an occasional small, labored grin. Then the voice was stentorian, the speech clear, the words pouring out—often in rhyme. Today his speech is slow, slurred, often inaudible. Then he was a Christian known for his proud patriotism. Today he is a Muslim known for his refusal to serve in the United States Army.

Then he was Cassius Clay. Today he is Muhammad Ali.

Ali. "The Greatest." The name and the nickname, although both familiar, continue to excite. His life has been intensely public. And the fights that have brought him a recognition more permanent than fame—Ali-Frazier, Ali-Norton, Ali-Foreman—are almost as well known today as when they were fought. But much of importance in Ali's life occurred in the late 1960s, a time of turmoil when upheaval was quotidian and the end of history seemed far away. And much about Ali was reported through a medium, television, that is inherently ephemeral. It is thus hard to remember the whole of Ali's story.

The whole is worth recalling for many reasons. One is the main character's charisma. Another is the plot's interconnection with the major men and movements of the period: Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, the Civil Rights struggle, and protests against the Vietnam war. The story includes multiple denouements: in the Supreme Court, in Madison Square Garden, in Manila, in Zaire. It includes as well tragic closing chapters. The story of Ali, however, is not fiction. And the facts, considered in retrospect, call into question America's faithfulness to fundamental fairness.

