

Chapter 15

“Black Steel”: Intraracial Rivalry, Soft Power, and Prize Fighting in the Cold War World

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s, struggles over Black Power politics and national sovereignty in a Cold War World played out in heavyweight championship “mega-matches” around the world. Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, and George Foreman represented very different visions of the postwar African American experience during the “Golden Age” of boxing—differences that manifested in the prize ring.¹ Pulitzer Prize-winner Gwendolyn Brooks wrote the poem “Black Steel” in hopes that the brutality of their matches would be mitigated by their shared experience as African American men, by racial unity.² In actuality, these intraracial rivalries exacerbated the real and perceived violence. The import of competing African American experiences reverberated outside of the United States as well, particularly in the Global South. Championship bouts between Ali, Frazier, and Foreman became a valuable cache of “soft power” for nations who were not “Super Powers.”³ Hosting one of these international mega-matches was a demonstration of viability and autonomy for those categorized as “Third World” in the taxonomy of the Cold War. Thus, the biggest prize fights—and some of the most important professional sporting events—

¹ Ira Berkow, “Memorable, Forgettable, and Others,” *New York Times (NYT)*, January 1, 1991; Jerry Izenberg, *Once There Were Giants: The Golden Age of Heavyweight Boxing* (New York: Skyhorse, 2017).

² Gwendolyn Brooks, *Black Steel: Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971).

³ Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, 80 (1990): 153-171.

in the 1970s took place well outside of the United States or Soviet Union: in Michael Manley's Jamaica, Rafael Caldera's Venezuela, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu's Zaire, and Ferdinand Marcos' Philippines.

This chapter historicizes and internationalizes the postwar African American experience by placing it in the cultural diplomacy of sport. It draws on primary sources like newspapers (including daily and weekly, national papers and the Black press, American and foreign publications, in English and some French), as well as popular sport-centric and boxing-specific magazines; secondary sources including scholarly journals, academic and trade press books, as well as credible digital publications; and also the relevant and declassified government documents. These sources bear out the competing visions of "blackness" personified by three popular prize fighters that attracted not only a domestic but a global audience, and made the African American experience an important aspect of cultural diplomacy in the Global South during the Cold War.

"A HOT PANTS CONTEST"

"There we stand in this year 1972, no longer bemused by White Hopes, no longer disturbed by racial rivalries," proclaimed *Ring Magazine* as a new era for prize fighting, one which did not rely on interracial matches—the search for a "Great White Hope"—stirred up popular interest. African American heavyweights unquestionably dominated the sport's most illustrious division and a Harris Poll showed that boxing's popularity surged even in a complicated racial climate. But renewed popular interest in the sport actually derived from an intensifying *intraracial* conflict between Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali, representing opposite poles of a divided Black freedom movement, and George Foreman, who adopted an image that posed a cultural critique of the Ali-Frazier binary.⁴

⁴ "Black Heavy Kings: Color Them Dramatic," *Ring*, March 1972, 50; Nat Fleischer, "Nat Fleischer Speaks Out," *Ring*, August 1972, 5; Andrew R.M. Smith, "Sculpting George Foreman: A Soul Era Champion in the Golden Age of Black Heavyweights," *Journal of Sport History*, 40:3 (2014), 456.

Media and advertisers capitalized on this rivalry. Ali had been an icon of the Black Power movement since he converted to Islam and discarded his “slave name” Clay in 1964, briefly adopting Cassius X before accepting a “full Muslim name” from Nation of Islam (NOI) leader Elijah Muhammad.⁵ Frazier, on the other hand, was a devout Christian with an equally strong faith in capitalism. He happily purchased a “plantation” in his native Beaufort, South Carolina, and rode around on a \$10,000 motorcycle adorned with an American flag.⁶ Black sportswriters like Brad Pye and Bryant Gumbel suggested Frazier was “the blackest White Hope in history” when juxtaposed with Ali. Before their first meeting in the ring, dubbed “Super Fight,” the Young and Rubicam Advertising Agency broadcast a telephone conversation between them. The call ended when their banter devolved into Frazier repeating, “Clay, Clay, Clay,” indicating his refusal to acknowledge Ali’s conversion, and Ali screaming into the receiver: “even white people call me Muhammad now...You’re known as the [Uncle] Tom in this fight!” In response, Frazier challenged Ali’s racial authenticity through skin color and social class: “I’m blacker than he is. There ain’t a black spot on his whole body.... Clay is a phony. He never worked. He never had a job. He don’t know nothing about life for most black people.”⁷ Even the presence of Brooks’ “Black Steel” on the fight program did not blunt their sharp differences. No sign of the “black love” Brooks wrote about appeared during the fifteen bloody rounds they fought, or afterwards as their palpable animosity—and that of their

⁵ On Ali’s early career and conversion, see David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (New York: Vintage, 1998) and Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith, *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship Between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X* (New York: Basic, 2016).

⁶ On Joe Frazier, see Phil Pepe, *Come Out Smokin’: Joe Frazier, the Champ Nobody Knew* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1972) and Andrew R.M. Smith, “Blood Stirs the Fight Crowd: Making and Marking Joe Frazier’s Philadelphia,” in Ryan A. Swanson and David K. Wiggins, eds., *Philly Sports: Teams, Games, and Athletes from Rocky’s Town*, (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2016), 127-145.

⁷ Brad Pye, “Prying Pye,” *Los Angeles Sentinel (LAS)*, November 12, 1970; Bryant Gumbel, “Is Joe Frazier a White Champion in a Black Skin?” *Boxing Illustrated (BI)*, October 1972, cover; “Frazier Pays a Bill,” *Chicago Defender (CD)*, January 15, 1972; Thomas Hauser, *Boxing Is...Reflections on the Sweet Science* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010), 88; Mel Ciociola “The Story Behind the Commercial of the Century,” *BI*, July 1971, 26-27.

respective fan bases—grew stronger and more divided. Prize fighting mirrored if not magnified the divisions within the African American community.⁸

Popular culture, however, also pushed the boundaries of traditional politics. The mainstreaming of “Black Power” brought more African Americans into the orbit of the black freedom movement, by way of Soul music, Blaxploitation films, Malcolm X t-shirts, and “afro” hairstyles, even though it often diluted the message. At the turn of the 1970s Blaxploitation film often ridiculed both the radicals and moderates that Ali or Frazier signified. Instead, protagonists were strong, cool, and fashionable but ultimately independent. A rising challenger in boxing’s heavyweight division, George Foreman, tapped into this cultural shift as he vied for his own space in a sport dominated by Ali and Frazier’s animus. Even if the commercialization of Black Power tempered its politics, the ability of pop culture to navigate between static binaries of White and Black or liberal and conservative made it politically important and, for Foreman, effective.⁹

On the eve of 1968’s presidential election George Foreman beat a Soviet fighter, Iionas Chapulis, to win the Olympic gold medal and then waved a miniature American flag. Before he could lower the flag and start dancing around the ring, like any other jubilant teenager, he had been anointed a patriot. Both presidential campaigns reached out to him for support and public appearances—even though he was not old enough to vote. Foreman became extremely popular, at least in Washington, D.C., but when he turned professional the following year, it soon became clear that fight fans did not put much stock in the kind of uber-patriot image that was better suited for professional

⁸ Thomas Thompson, “The Battle of the Undefeated Giants,” *Life*, March 5, 1971, 40-48; Ray Kennedy, “Bull v. Butterfly: A Clash of Champions,” *Time*, March 8, 1971, 49-55; Mark Kram, “End of the Ali Legend,” *Sports Illustrated (SI)*, March 15, 1971, 16-21; Norman Mailer, “Ego,” *Life*, March 19, 1971, 18F, 28-36.

⁹ Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2005), 118-119; William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 195-224; William Van Deburg, *Black Camelot: African American Culture Heroes in Their Times, 1960-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 153-154; Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 18-25, 38; *Baadasssss Cinema—A Bold Look at 70’s Blaxploitation Films*, directed by Isaac Julien (Independent Film Channel, 2002).

wrestling. Despite winning all of his fights, usually by knockout, fans across the country booed him and matchmakers did not foresee him as a championship contender in the near future. From late 1970 through 1971, however, Foreman took cues from his manager who implored him to adopt a “take charge” attitude as well as the cultural climate of the Soul Era, with its cool Black antiheroes, to fashion a new image. Learning first-hand from other Black athletic celebrities like Jim Brown and Walt Frazier, Foreman adopted a “cool pose” that resonated with more fans—and boxing promoters took notice.¹⁰

Boxing Illustrated noticed the transition and featured a cover story on “The Two Faces of George Foreman” that reconciled a new image which had some “unpleasantness” under the cool new clothes and sharp comments but undoubtedly made him a more interesting subject to write about.¹¹ When the negotiations over a rematch between Frazier and Ali hit an impasse, Foreman was thrust into consideration as a heavyweight championship contender. Teddy Brenner, the head of Madison Square Garden’s (MSG) boxing programming, had been decidedly reserved about Foreman’s potential and insisted he needed more seasoning against better competition before earning a chance to fight for the title. Suddenly, Brenner called him the best prospect since Joe Louis just as former heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson said that Foreman was “the only man left in the top ten capable of...stirring up some interest among the fans.” Les Matthews of the *New York Amsterdam News* declared that this new Foreman had “star material.” Earlier in the year, Matthews suggested that prize fighting had become a “hot pants contest” that considered style more than ability; Foreman’s ascension buttressed that belief. Through an image reconstruction, Foreman marketed himself to the top of the

¹⁰ Smith, “Sculpting George Foreman,” 457-460; Richard Majors, “Cool Pose: Black Masculinity and Sport,” in Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, eds., *Critical Perspectives on Sport, Men, and Masculinity* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1990), 120-142; Walt Frazier and Ira Berkow, *Rockin’ Steady: A Guide to Basketball and Cool* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974), 11-20; bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 156.

¹¹ Bert Sugar, “The Two Sides of George Foreman: Is He Is or Is He Ain’t?” *BI*, February 1973, cover, 10-13, 63.

heavyweight division just as the “politics of cool” sold tickets to Blaxploitation films and Soul records.¹²

Boxing’s “Era of Fantastic Millions,” as Brenner called it in the mid-1970s, trafficked in the fierce intraracial divisions facing African Americans in a post-civil rights period. Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, and George Foreman all represented competing definitions of Black Power. Each of these three boxers appealed to or enraged millions of Black and White Americans, and many more whose identity fell outside of a facile racial binary. When those tensions were localized in less than 400 square feet, it was indeed worth millions of dollars. But these mega-matches between Ali, Frazier, and Foreman extended also to people who did not reckon with questions of race and identity in the U.S. Nations on four different continents paid dearly for the privilege of hosting these African American boxers because their matches became so valuable that they carried at least the perception of geopolitical significance in the context of a Global Cold War.¹³

“THE WORLD IS MY RING”

Race played a significant role in these contexts as well. Penny Von Eschen wrote that “race was America’s Achilles heel” as the dichotomy between promoting freedoms abroad and preserving racial inequality at home made it more difficult to win the hearts and minds of people in the Global South. After World War II, Paul Robeson used his platform as a Black celebrity to ratchet up challenges regarding the American system’s efficacy for people of color. In the early 1950s singer, dancer, and entertainer Josephine Baker posed

¹² Dan Daniel, “Is George Foreman Next Champ?” *Ring*, July 1971, 6-7, 39; Floyd Patterson, “What Now, Heavyweights?” *BI*, June 1971, 22; Les Mathews, “Foreman is Star Material,” *New York Amsterdam News (NYAN)*, November 13, 1971; Les Mathews, “The Sports Whirl,” *NYAN*, April 24, 1971; Smith, “Sculpting George Foreman,” 459-462.

¹³ Dan Daniel, “Brenner Invites King to Rent Garden, But His Fights Must Merit Arena,” *Ring*, November, 1975, 18.

a more subtle critique of racial discrimination in the U.S. when she performed abroad. In contrast, the Eisenhower administration initiated state-sponsored “missions” of Black jazz musicians, including Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington, to spread the word—again through pop culture—of the marked improvement in America’s racial climate. By the turn of the 1960s the missions extended to sport as well, sending popular Black athletes on “Goodwill Tours” to show that the “First World’s” racial barriers had come down.¹⁴

Throughout 1972, popular interest grew for a fight between two different expressions of African American identity—a northeastern, Motown-singing Frazier versus the southwestern Soul brother in Foreman. However, the champion refused to fight in the traditional “Mecca” of the sport, New York City, because new state taxes levied just before Super Fight significantly affected the net profits. Meanwhile the challenger became entangled in lawsuits that threatened injunctions against a title fight with Frazier. Therefore, the best offer came from outside the country as nations in the Global South searched for ways to wrest or retain influence in the Cold War world. The Frazier-Foreman fight was an attempt to use sport as the kind of “soft power” Joseph Nye identified as important to achieving foreign policy goals without using the “hard power” of military force.¹⁵

Jamaica promised freedom from American court decisions and favorable taxes that meant its offer could dwarf the financial promises of New York City, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, and Houston. Such a bid was made possible because the Jamaican government, in the first term of Prime Minister Michael Manley who enjoyed a 70% majority in

¹⁴ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 5; Tony Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex: Race, Madness, Activism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 2-6; Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 227-250; Mary L. Dudziak, “Josephine Baker, Racial Protest, and the Cold War,” *Journal of American History*, 81:2 (1994), 543-570.

¹⁵ Nye, “Soft Power,” 153-171; Jeffrey Hill, “Introduction: Sport and Politics,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38:3 (2003), 355-361; J.A. Mangan, “In Pursuit of Perspective: The Other Empire of Sport—Cultural Imperialism for Confident Control and Consequent Legacies,” *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 28:17 (2011), 2609-2624.

Parliament, nationalized the event. The government owned "National Stadium" in Kingston, where the fight would take place, and borrowed nearly \$2 million from the Bank of Nova Scotia to pay the boxers. Despite protestations from some politicians and private citizens about the financial risks, the Prime Minister and the media pressed on. Readers of the *Jamaica Daily Gleaner* followed nearly every step in the process with great enthusiasm, particularly during "Tourism Month" in October which culminated in a full-page ad from Manley himself, imploring Jamaicans to serve and assist all the tourists who would flood the island to watch this event, nicknamed the "Sunshine Showdown."¹⁶

The Frazier-Foreman fight illuminated a relationship between Black Power and the power of sport in Cold War geopolitics. Manley's political campaign revolved around cultural unity for an electorate that was predominantly Black but, like the African American community, remained deeply divided along lines such as class and religion. He also envisioned a foreign policy of non-alignment that required proving Jamaica's strength and sovereignty to the world. His administration believed that hosting a significant prize fight between two Black contenders could speak to both goals. Not long after Manley's election Jamaica's government subsidized a heavyweight championship bout, touting its racial symbolism while broadcasting it as a display of soft power in diplomatic circles. Foreman used elements of Black pop culture to position himself as an exciting antihero to either Frazier or Ali and, for many, interrupted the logical if not lineal trajectory of boxing's heavyweight championship. Similarly, Manley's Jamaica usurped an event that seemed destined for New York City, sparking a reformation in heavyweight championship matchmaking that ultimately made boxing a tool for cultural diplomacy in the 1970s.¹⁷

It is unclear whether or not the uptick in tourism around the Sunshine Showdown, let alone any residual tourism after the fact, recouped the significant investment of the Jamaican government in a single prize fight. But it is unlikely. The proceeds from ticket

¹⁶ Dan Daniel, "Jamaica Chases American Frazier-Foreman Bidders out of Battle for Title," *Ring*, January 1973, 6; H.L. Morrison, letter to the editor, *Jamaica Daily Gleaner (JDG)*, October 31, 1972; "Seaga Wants Title Fight Arrangements Probed," *JDG*, November 10, 1972. For Manley's "Tourism Month" advertisement, see, *JDG*, October 15, 1972.

¹⁷ Smith, "Sculpting George Foreman," 467.

sales and ancillary revenues came up \$750,000 short of the cost to stage it. However, the event attracted a great deal of attention for Manley, who began a series of diplomatic missions to places like Venezuela and Cuba while leading Jamaica into the Non-Aligned Movement. The fight itself lasted about five minutes, but it set a new precedent for transnational boxing matches that both globalized and politicized boxing in the Cold War climate of the 1970s. In the midst of his first interview after winning the title, Foreman bellowed: "The World is My Ring!" Under his reign he lived up to that statement, defending the championship three more times in three other countries. Even though Jamaica lost money from the match, several other nations vied for the opportunity to host a Foreman title fight, suggesting widespread belief that the unquantifiable long-term benefits of international prestige justified short-term financial losses.¹⁸

Nations in each of the three "worlds" that comprised the Cold War order wrestled with "stagflation"—the simultaneous rise in living costs and unemployment rates—and a shortage of oil sparked a steep increase in energy costs as well. Yet Latin America, Jeremy Adelman writes, "was not experiencing a generalized malaise in the early 1970s" and instead enjoyed at least more available credit if not actual growth. The most developed nations in Latin America began to reenter a global economy which "represented a pendular swing in the region's relationship with international money." And *Ring* reported in its "Roundup" of 1972 that only one region of the world, Latin America, experienced marked growth in heavyweight boxing. As a major supplier of petroleum, Venezuela

¹⁸ Nat Loubet, "As Nat Loubet Sees It," *Ring*, August 1974, 5; Christopher James Shelton, "Down Goes Frazier! The Sunshine Showdown," *The Ringside Boxing Show*, <http://www.ringsideboxingshow.com/SheltonBLOGForemanFrazier.html>; Michael Kaufman, *Jamaica Under Manley: Dilemmas of Socialism and Democracy* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1985), 50; Hans J. Massaquoi, "Interview with Jamaica Prime Minister Michael Manley," *Ebony*, February 1990, 110; Pearnel Charles, "Jamaica and the Third World," *JDG*, December 3, 1972; John D. Forbes, *Jamaica: Managing Political and Economic Change* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1985), 22; Darrell E. Levi, *Michael Manley: The Making of a Leader* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 135-40, 304; Christopher J. Lee, "Between a Moment and an Era: The Origins and Afterlives of Bandung," in Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 2-19.

reaped the benefits of rising prices. But as a nation with a long history of domestic political turmoil and isolation from foreign affairs, it still suffered from a deficit of political capital. Hosting a championship prize fight between the cool young champion who cracked the American Fashion Foundation's top-ten best-dressed men, against a straight-edged former Marine, was an investment for Venezuelan President Rafael Caldera. He intended to leverage their hostility to draw in a large international audience and demonstrate his nation's place on a global stage—while hopefully securing his own reelection.¹⁹

After a brief (less than two minutes of boxing) title defense against José Roman in Tokyo, Foreman accepted Venezuela's offer and agreed to fight Ken Norton in Caracas. In the interim, Frazier and Ali squared off again for a fraction of their previous purses—about 1/3 in fact. They even fought a little for free this time when, instead of just televising phone conversations, the two rivals appeared on stages together for joint interviews to promote the upcoming bout while denigrating each other. Verbal sparring on the *Dick Cavett Show* gave way to a physical altercation over Howard Cosell on ABC's *Wide World of Sports* and reaffirmed the genuine hostility between the two. The action in the ring again surpassed expectations, this time with Ali edging out Frazier in another very close and visibly brutal clash at MSG; once again they both took a beating from state authorities in the form of a 14% tax on their one-night performance. Ambitious hosts in the Global South, like Venezuela, would not offer millions of tax-free dollars for anything less than a championship match.²⁰

In a sports-centric country "obsessed" with its three B's—baseball, bullfighting, and boxing—the Foreman-Norton fight marked one of the most significant events in Venezuela's recent history. Securing the rights to host it, however, did not save Caldera's

¹⁹ Dan Daniel, "Norton Looks like Foreman's First Problem as Quarry Waits," *Ring*, March 1974, 20; Nat Loubet, "Roundup of the Year," *Ring*, February 1973, 17; Jeremy Adelman, "International Finance and Political Legitimacy: A Latin American View of the Global Shock," in Ferguson, et al., *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective*, 115-126; Shirley Norman, "With Foreman, It's U.S.A. All the Way," *Ring*, October 1973, 34.

²⁰ Jimmy Breslin, "Ali & Frazier: Three Years Later," *Sport*, February 1974, 24-28; Richard Hoffer, *Bouts of Mania: Ali, Frazier, Foreman and an America on the Ropes* (New York: Da Capo, 2014), 125-128.

position. Just weeks before the event dubbed *El Gran Boxeo*, a new president, Carlos Andres Pérez, was inaugurated in front of a large national attendance and some international delegates, including First Lady Pat Nixon. Pérez promised sweeping changes and did not guarantee a friendlier relationship with the U.S., but he made it clear he would not jeopardize *El Gran Boxeo* in March 1974. He went a step farther and dictated that it would air live and for free on Venezuelan television. The decision negatively affected ticket sales for the freshly built stadium, *El Poliedro*, while venues that offered the picture and some gambling—such as the *La Rinconada* race track—profited. The new administration enjoyed all the prestige of the fight but hedged its investment by reneging on the tax incentives Caldera's regime had promised. Foreman knocked out Norton in the second round but fighters, promoters, and the closed-circuit television outfit who broadcast it all battled through a long, drawn out fight with Venezuela's new government. Despite appealing to officials, in this case U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela Robert McClintock and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, they lost a unanimous decision to Pérez. Norton had to pay \$70,000 to get his passport back and return home; Foreman's bill was upwards of \$300,000; and Video Techniques claimed a loss of \$50,000 per day for the two weeks their closed-circuit television broadcast equipment remained impounded in Caracas. After the fighters and filmers left, another U.S. cabinet member arrived, Secretary of the Treasury George Schulz. He did not, however, come to Caracas to demand remuneration or even an apology for the offended citizens. Instead, Schulz entered into negotiations for a new tax agreement regarding American performers in Venezuela, similar to the agreement in place with the Soviet Union. McClintock was obviously frustrated, but he wrote to Schulz: "The problem of taxation of foreigners performing temporarily in Venezuela may take on increasing significance as Caracas becomes more and more a world conference and entertainment center" in the aftermath of *El Gran Boxeo*.²¹

²¹ Jerry Izenberg, "El Gran Boxeo," *Newark Star-Ledger (NSL)*, March 24, 1974; William H. Heath, "Tax Squabbles Delay Champ's Venezuela Exit," *Miami Herald (MH)*, March 29, 1974; "Foreman, Norton Held in Caracas Over Taxes," *New York Post (NYP)*, March 28, 1974; "Foreman, Norton Still Unable to Leave Caracas," *Houston Post (HP)*, March 29,

Ambassador McClintock's last communique relating to the Foreman-Norton affair went directly to the U.S. Embassy in Kinshasa, Zaire. The next in this series of transnational title fights was set to take place in the former Belgian Congo and future Democratic Republic of the Congo. McClintock shared insight from his recent experience as mediator between foreign governments and American boxing interests with his colleagues in Central Africa. He suggested clarifying the conditions of taxation and other details such as referees and officials that caused undue strife in Caracas. He also wrote that it would save the embassy a headache if both principals, Foreman and Ali, simultaneously knocked each other out. Although McClintock soured on these major international prize fights, the forthcoming heavyweight championship bout would be the most lucrative (for fighters) and expensive (for the host country) boxing match to date.²²

"ERA OF FANTASTIC MILLIONS"

In anticipation of the mega-match between Foreman and Ali, billboards dotted Zaire through the second half of 1974. Many of them not only drew attention to the fighters but to the political leader who brought them here. "The Zairian people thank their Enlightened Guide, President MOBUTU SESE SEKO, the promoter of this brotherly reunion

1974; "Norton on Way Home—Foreman Still in Caracas," *NYP*, March 30, 1974; "Foreman is Still Stalled in Caracas," *NYT*, March 30, 1974; "Taxes Bite Champ for 300G's," *CD*, April 4, 1974; American Embassy Caracas [AEC] to Secretary of State, Washington, DC [SSDC], "Fight Over the Fights," March 26, 1974, "Secretary Schultz Travel Schedule," March 26, 1974, "Penultimate Fight Over Fights," March 27, 1974, "The Fight Goes On," March 29, 1974, and "Possible Advantages in a Taxation Treaty with Venezuela," April 1, 1974, all in Central Foreign Policy Files [CFPF], Record Group [RG] 59, National Archives and Records Administration—Access to Archival Database [AAD].

²² AEC to American Embassy Kinshasa [AEK], "Ali-Foreman Fight Preparations," May 10, 1974, in CFPF, RG 59, AAD.

between the Black people who stayed in the land of their ancestors and those [who] were scattered around the world," one read. Another preached that "Black Power is sought everywhere in the world, but it is realized here in Zaire." To drive the point home, a third explained: "A Fight between two blacks in a black nation organized by blacks and seen by the whole world; this is the victory of Mobutism."

In the U.S., which had been very supportive of Mobutu since the early stages of decolonizing the Congo, this latest victory represented a defeat. Many writers were vexed that "Darkest Africa" wrested such an important event from American venues; that the nation which invented the "million dollar gate" in boxing a half-century earlier could not match an offer from a country that did not even appear on a map more than a few years old.²³ Some, like *Ring Magazine's* editor Nat Loubet, tried to rationalize the global trajectory of boxing's most important matches by citing the tax incentives foreign governments offered and technological innovations that made it possible to beam images from anywhere in the world to television connections back home. "As indicated by a steady rise in *Ring* circulation and subscriptions, and the increase in major matches," Loubet wrote, "the fight game is flourishing amazingly all over the world." But he framed it within a Cold War context: "Make exceptions of Russia and China, which are too busy with international power and politics to devote any time to boxing."²⁴ It would be naïve to think that leaders in Jamaica or Venezuela were apolitical in their aggressive pursuit of the rights to host a championship prize fight. They exploited the disorganized and unregulated structure of professional boxing, as well as the global appeal of inter- and intra-racial hostilities in the U.S., to gain popularity and consolidate power. Mobutu's Zaire simply did it bigger and more explicitly, drumming up a guaranteed purse of \$5 million each for the principals and racializing not just the action in the ring but the entire saga

²³ Anthony Merenghi, "Africa Dents U.S. Boxing Monopoly," *NLS*, March 28, 1974; Sam Taub, "What, In Heaven's Name, Is a Zaire?" *Ring*, July 1974, 10.

²⁴ Nat Loubet, "As Nat Loubet Sees it," *Ring*, August 1974, 5.

leading up to it as a manifestation of pan-African Black Power on the world stage—and affirmation of Mobutu’s unchallenged rule in Zaire.²⁵

“Sporting events are often used as opportunities to swagger,” British cultural historian Gerard DeGroot notes, “Mobutu simply took that phenomenon and multiplied it exponentially.”²⁶ In addition to the purses, some of which had already been deposited in American bank accounts, Mobutu pumped tens of millions of dollars more into refurbishing the *Stade du 20 Mai*, a stadium named for the date Mobutu established his “Mouvement Populaire de la Revolution,” which quickly became the only political party in the nation. He also invested in the infrastructure for a mega-event, including a new airport, highways, and parking lots that would accommodate all the traffic from tourists around the world to the center of Kinshasa. The Liberian government, at Mobutu’s request, quietly pitched in for an accompanying music festival that would feature African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American artists in a celebration of rhythmic diaspora; or, as documentarian Leon Gast called it, “the history of the beat.” This explicit emphasis on transnational Black unity paralleled the message from Brooks’ “Black Steel” in a more global context, but was similarly undermined by the widening differences between the two Black principals in this prize fight and a media enthralled by reporting on it.²⁷

From very early in his professional career, Muhammad Ali drove interest in his upcoming matches by insulting prospective opponents. When he came up against African American fighters, particularly after joining the NOI and changing his name, Ali often questioned their racial authenticity and labeled them “Uncle Toms.” Joe Frazier bore the

²⁵ Randy Roberts and Andrew R.M. Smith, “The Report of My Death Was an Exaggeration: The Many Sordid Lives of America’s Bloodiest Pastime,” *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31:1-2 (2014), 72-90.

²⁶ Gerard J. DeGroot, *The Seventies Unplugged: A Kaleidoscopic Look at a Violent Decade* (New York: Macmillan, 2011), 320.

²⁷ *Soul Power*, directed by Jeffrey Levy-Hinte (Antidote Films, 2008); Mavomo Nzuzi Zola, “Enfin, un Nouveau Stade du 20 Mai,” *Salongo*, September 23, 1974; American Embassy Monrovia [AEM] to SSDC, “Tolberts May Be Financial Backers of Cultural Festival in Zaire,” October 30, 1974 in CFPF, RG 59, AAD; Kalonji Kabasele Muboyayi, “Kinshasa est Prêt pour Abriter la Grande Explication Ali-Foreman,” *Elima*, September 7, 1974; “Le Festival de Kinshasa,” *Elima*, September 16, 1974.

brunt of this more, perhaps, than any of Ali's adversaries in the long prelude to their first bout. By the time they met for a rematch, however, Ali reversed course and instead began to mock Frazier's intelligence; he took to calling him "ignorant" and rather than "whitening" Frazier, he began caricaturing him as *too* Black. It was the kind of class-based antagonism that would not seem so out of place from a lighter-skinned man who grew up in a border state in relation to a darker-skinned man from a rural community in the Deep South. But it was a stark change for Ali. He continued this as he prepared to challenge Foreman for the title. While some writers questioned if Foreman represented a "white" champion, Ali mocked him as a product of an urban ghetto—Houston's "Bloody" Fifth Ward. Ali claimed he developed a new punch that would dethrone the champion: the "ghetto whopper." Then after a physical altercation with Foreman during an awards dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria, Ali overemphasized his opponent's blackness by calling him a "nigger" in a room full of hundreds of writers and fighters.²⁸

Foreman tried to maintain his cool pose, although staying disengaged from Ali pushed him into a reclusive posture. That only gave "the Greatest" an unopposed platform. His message pivoted again when he landed in Zaire and tried to secure the popularity of the Zairois fans by telling them Foreman (and his dog) was "a Belgium"—a tag that struck colonial chords in Zaire. Bringing the kind of shepherd that Belgian authorities used to help maintain "order" during their rule over the Congo may have offended some proud Zairois, but Ali was not any more culturally sensitive. He proclaimed that, because he had popular support in Zaire, locals would assist him by "sticking pins in voodoo dolls" of Foreman and that, if he were not careful, Ali's new "friends" would "put you in a pot." Recycling images of cannibalism for American consumers did not align

²⁸ Michael Arkush, *The Fight of the Century: Ali vs. Frazier March 8, 1971* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2008), 206-207; Mark Kram, *Ghosts of Manila: The Fateful Blood Feud Between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 159-160; Andrew R.M. Smith, "Series Overview—Life and Legacy of Muhammad Ali," *Sport in American History*, <https://ussporthistory.com/2017/02/23/series-overview-life-and-legacy-of-muhammad-ali/>, February 23, 2017; Fred Rothenberg, "Ali Does All the Talking," *Associated Press*, May 16, 1974; *Sport*, July 1973, cover; *BI*, July 1974, cover; Dave Anderson, "Broken Glasses at the Waldorf," *NYT*, June 24, 1974.

with the emerging nation's aspirations any more than references to voodoo in a country where 75% of citizens identified as Roman Catholic. Yet while Foreman sought to stay out of the pre-fight publicity as much as possible, Mobutu's administration prepared its counter-offensive against such images of primitivism.²⁹

The stories sent out from Kinshasa—some directly to American writers and publishers—focused on Zaire's modernity via comparisons to the U.S. From hotels to restaurants, everything in Zaire they pledged would be comfortable and familiar. Although they happily trafficked in stereotypes and fetishes when describing opportunities for safari and visits to "friendly pygmy villages," the narrative focused on a nation not just emerging but already *emerged*. A press kit sent to Norman Mailer, who had been contracted to write a book about the fight months before it took place, called Zaire "a new dateline in the ever-growing almanac of sport" while the official fight program acknowledged Zaire was "aiming at becoming a respected and listened-to member of the world community." Accomplishing that goal rested not only on the deluge of stories Zairois sources sent out but also the defense against pieces from foreign press corps that Mobutu did not want published.³⁰

Beginning with monikers for the event, Zairois "editors"—all under the influence of the Enlightened Guide—made liberal use of the "blue pen" for correcting written material. They immediately rejected the tag-line "From Slave Ship to Championship" and also strongly objected to the "Rumble in the Jungle" although that term stuck in the American sports media.³¹ They closely monitored articles from specific journalists including Tom

²⁹ Hoffer, *Bouts of Mania*, 146-148; Izenberg, *Once There Were Giants*, 96-97; Anderson, "Broken Glasses at the Waldorf"; Jeremy Rich, "Zaire for Jesus: Ford Philpot's Revivals in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 1966-1978," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 43:1 (2013), 4-28; Kenneth Lee Adelman, "The Church-State Conflict in Zaire," *African Studies Review*, 18:1 (1975), 102-116.

³⁰ "Mailer Press Kit," in the Norman Mailer Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas; Norman Mailer, *The Fight*, (New York: Vintage, 1997).

³¹ Mailer, *The Fight*, 156-157; AEK to United States Information Service [USIS], "Ali-Foreman Entourage in Kinshasa for Fight Preparations," and "Ali-Foreman Fight Preparations," both May 8, 1974, in CFPF, RG 59, AAD; Dan Daniel, "September 25, at 3 A.M., Scheduled for Foreman-Ali Championship Fight in Zaire," *Ring*, July 1974, 8-9.

Johnson of the *New York Times* and Andrew Jaffe from *Newsweek*, who covered African politics critically. Not surprisingly, as the American Embassy in Kinshasa became keenly aware, both writers encountered many hurdles securing and maintaining visas to enter Zaire in the months leading up to the Foreman-Ali fight.³²

Even sportswriters, such as Larry Merchant then writing for the *New York Post*, were subject to censorship. Merchant, like Mailer and many others, decided to return stateside when a cut to Foreman's eye postponed the fight for a month. Then Merchant was told he would not be granted a visa for reentry because an exposé he authored about a Zairois travel agent who promised an all-inclusive package to an American woman that did not, in fact, include lodging or meals, should not have been allowed out of Zaire. The U.S. Embassy in Kinshasa, on the other hand, agreed not to release its discovery about a sharp rise (more than 60%) in hotel rates since May or publicize the new Mobutu policy that foreign visitors spend a *per diem* (equivalent to about \$40) every day they stayed in the country. The impending event, whenever it would take place and whatever people chose to call it, was too important—and profitable—to jeopardize.³³

Foreman and Ali each had five million reasons to refrain from any critiques of Zaire. Not that anyone would have expected Foreman to suddenly take a hard political stance or comment on American foreign relations any more than his haphazard wave of a miniature flag now six years in the rear view mirror. But Ali, of course, gave up the prime years of his fighting career for refusing to join the American military's intervention in Vietnam, and he along with the NOI eagerly shone light on systemic racial inequality. Their agreement to fight in Zaire and take Mobutu's money supported an authoritarian regime that threatened the freedoms of millions more people of color. Yet Ali sent a message straight to the White House offering to cover the cost of a closed-circuit hook

³² AEK to USIS, "NY Times Articles on Zaire," June 28, 1974 and "Zairian Visa for Newsweek's Andrew Jaffe," July 24, 1974 both in CFPF, RG 59, AAD.

³³ AEK to SSDC, "Ali-Foreman Faces Possible Postponement," September 17, 1974 in CFPF, RG 59, AAD; Larry Merchant, "No Problem," *NYP*, September 27, 1974 and "Our Man is Barred from Zaire," *NYP*, October 24, 1974; AEK to SSDC, "Revised Hotel and Restaurant Section of DSP-23," November 11, 1974 and "Ali-Foreman Fight," July 26, 1974, both in CFPF, RG 59, AAD.

up for President Ford's television to ensure he got a live view. Ford did not reply to Ali, but he did send a cable to Mobutu with congratulations for an "outstanding contribution to a sporting event of world significance." The event became even more significant when, against the odds, Ali withstood Foreman's barrage and knocked him down for the first time in his professional career, scoring what the *Semaine Africaine* called the knockout of the century.³⁴

Back in New York, the *Times*' Red Smith believed the Rumble in the Jungle represented the high tide of international mega-matches, and he projected their decline. 1974 was, Smith wrote, "the year the golden egg cracked." But with the resurrection of Ali as heavyweight champion of the world and the global prestige accorded to Mobutu's Zaire, other nations vied for the rights to host Ali's next title fight and elevate themselves out of "third world" status. Boxing promoters in concert with closed-circuit television providers were happy to facilitate the cultural diplomacy of sport through prize fights. Jack Welsh, editor for *Boxing Illustrated*, insisted that only the "oil-rich" nations in the Middle East could afford the ballooning purses. He did not account for Southeast Asian nations who, in the wake of Saigon's "fall" in 1975, were desperate to preserve their own reputations across the South China Sea. The Malaysian government put up \$2 million for Ali's tune-up bout against Joe Bugner, but the Philippines was prepared to invest significantly more to host a *bona fide* mega-match in Manila—the decisive installment of Ali and Frazier's trilogy.³⁵

Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos tried to keep the Philippines afloat in the choppy waters between Cold War superpowers. They focused on presenting images of order and growth that belied mounting debt and dissent, which they quelled with a combination of

³⁴ AEK to SSDC, "Ali-Foreman Match," October 15, 1974 and "Message from President Ford to Mobutu," October 30, 1974, in CFPF, RG 59, AAD; Mailer, *The Fight*, 98; "Un K.O. Retentissant et Historique pour le Super-Combat du Siècle," *La Semaine Africaine*, November 10, 1974.

³⁵ Red Smith, "The Year the Golden Egg Cracked," *NYT*, December 22, 1974; Jack Welsh, "Editorial," *BI*, April 1975, 6; "Ali Outpoints Bugner and Keeps Title; Champion Decides to Continue Career," *NYT*, July 1, 1975; Daniel, "Brenner Invites King to Rent Garden," 18-19, 46.

foreign aid and martial law. Ascertaining the rights to host Ali-Frazier III was a cornerstone in the Marcos' façade. It became a protracted—and expensive—television commercial for the Marcos regime as American cameras panned from the Araneta Coliseum to the Malacanan Palace. Though staunchly Catholic, the Marcos seemed less interested in the Christian challenger Frazier and more fascinated by the Muslim champion, Ali. Even when the cameras caught an embarrassing misunderstanding as Imelda called Ali's girlfriend Veronica Porsche his wife—much to the chagrin of Belinda Ali back home—such *faux pas* were swept under the very expensive rugs in the palace just as the corruption and persecution within the nation were left off-camera. Proclamation No. 1081, which ushered in martial law to the Philippines in 1972 and specifically targeted an Islamic separatist group called the Moro National Liberation Front, remained in place when Ali and Frazier arrived in Manila to sign their contracts. The terms guaranteed Ali \$4.5 million against a percentage of the total revenue from tickets and television, with at least \$3 million coming directly from the Filipino government which, given its propensity to siphon off aid dollars, opens up the possibility the U.S. government in fact subsidized a portion of Ali's purse in a nation that oppressed its Muslim minority.³⁶

Frazier expressed little to no interest in the Marcos or Ali families during his stay in Manila. Though he stood to earn half the purse of Ali he was fully focused not just on regaining the title but doling out as much punishment as possible in the process. His tolerance for Ali's promotional antics had run out by their third meeting. In response, Ali ratcheted up the insults. If he sought to deracialize Frazier by labeling him an Uncle Tom in 1971, over the next four years he dehumanized him. Accusations of ignorance that sparked their fight on the *Wide World of Sports* set were compounded with denunciations

³⁶ James K. Boyce, *The Philippines: The Political Economy of Growth and Impoverishment in the Marcos Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 8, 303-338; Albert F. Celoz, *Ferdinand Marcos and the Philippines: The Political Economy of Authoritarianism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 39-72; Kram, *Ghosts of Manila*, 173-175; "Ali Makes Frazier Bout Official," *NYT*, July 18, 1975; Dave Anderson, "Magellan to MacArthur to Muhammad," *NYT*, September 23, 1975; Andrew R.M. Smith, "Revisiting the Thrilla in Manila: Boxing's Golden Era 40 Years Later" *Sport in American History*, <https://ussporthistory.com/2015/10/01/revisiting-the-thrilla-in-manila-boxings-golden-era-40-years-later/>, October 1, 2015.

of his appearance. Frazier, Ali said, was not just dumb but ugly; he was not a man, but rather a "gorilla." The poet laureate of the prize ring cut down consonants as he had opponents to rhyme off: "It's gonna' be a killa' and a thrilla' and a chilla' when I get that gorilla in Manila." Frazier kept his retorts short. "I'll make Ali fight for his life." And he very nearly did. After fourteen rounds Ali had trouble breathing and reportedly asked his corner to cut off his gloves. Before they could determine if he wanted to quit or just thought they ended the fifteenth and final round, Frazier's manager did stop the fight because his man could not see anymore. Their last meeting was undoubtedly the most brutal and also highest-paying of the three-part series: television proceeds raised the purses to a total \$13 million.³⁷

After Frazier and Ali recovered, they continued to criticize each other. Neither uttered a negative syllable about their Filipino hosts. In fact, Ali returned to Quezon City the next year to dedicate a new shopping mall, reinforcing the modernity of this authoritarian archipelago, while his barbs about the gorilla reified images of Frazier as something primitive. George Foreman relied more on humor than invectives to drum up interest in his rematch with Frazier. They both filmed a series of television spots dressed up as historical figures, including Betsy Ross, for their meeting in New York during the bicentennial summer. Again, Foreman pummeled Frazier and for the second straight match; his manager stopped the fight before Frazier could take any more punishment, ushering him into retirement. That set the stage for a seemingly inevitable return bout between Foreman and Ali. This time, Ali appropriated the epithet he previously launched at Foreman. "None of them niggers want Foreman," he said at a press conference, sitting beside Ken Norton, who had just starred as Mede in the film *Mandingo*. "Only this nigger, me, can take him." Rumors suggested they would reconvene at National Stadium in Kingston, a brand-new venue in Cairo, or even the Roman Coliseum, but none of those proposals came to fruition. Foreman followed Frazier into retirement in 1977. Between 1978 and 1979 Ali lost, regained, and gave up the title—without fighting overseas again.

³⁷ *Thrilla in Manila*, directed by John Dower (HBO, 2008); Dick Shaap, "The Manila Maulers," *Sport*, December 1975, 61-67; Joe Frazier, "I'll Make Ali Fight for His Life," *Ring*, October 1975, 8-9.

As the fierce intraracial rivalry between three Black heavyweights dissipated, so too did the appetite for hosting an international championship prize fight.³⁸

CONCLUSION

The generation of heavyweight boxers following Frazier, Foreman, and Ali at the turn of the 1980s did not have the same global appeal or loaded racial rivalries in an era envisioned as “post-civil rights” if not “colorblind,” while geopolitical divisions softened in a thawing Cold War climate.³⁹ International mega-matches were no longer a blue chip investment for tourist dollars or diplomatic prestige. One country desperate for good public relations was Apartheid-era South Africa, and hotelier Sol Kerzner tried to resurrect the Era of Fantastic Millions in a kind of red-light resort called “Sun City.” Though he secured an interracial heavyweight championship fight between native South African challenger Gerrie Coetzee and African American champion Mike Weaver in 1980, it did not engender an encore. Moreover, Black athletes in the U.S. were able to deter other African American boxers from legitimizing South African Apartheid by agreeing to perform in Sun City.⁴⁰

³⁸ Smith, “Revisiting the *Thrilla in Manila*”; “Heavens to Betsy and by George! Have Foreman and Frazier Wiggged Out?” *People*, June 7, 1976, 24; Smith, “Blood Stirs the Fight Crowd,” 144; Dave Anderson, “Show Ali a Close-Up of Foreman,” *NYT*, October 5, 1976; Mark Kram, “Not the Greatest Way to Go,” *SI*, October 11, 1976, 36-38; “Ali in Jamaica Talking of Foreman,” *NYT*, January 1, 1975; “See Foreman Rematch in Four Months, Says Ali,” *CD*, February 24, 1975; Dan Daniel, “Boxing World Over Waits for Ali to Quit Hibernation,” *Ring*, March 1975, 20; “Ali v. Foreman in New Year?” *Boxing News*, December 17, 1976, cover.

³⁹ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 250-254.

⁴⁰ Jack Newfield, *Only in America: The Life and Crimes of Don King* (New York: William Morrow, 1995), 196-197. On the history of boxing in Las Vegas, see Richard O. Davies,

Instead, America's "Sin City" became the new "Mecca" of prize fighting when hotel-casinos on the Las Vegas Strip recognized that hosting an event like a heavyweight title bout stimulated significant action not just on their sports books but at their tables and on the slot machines as well. In the 1970s, foreign governments relied on tourist dollars and ticket sales to cover the expense of hosting a big-time title bout and paying the multi-million dollar purses to fighters. In 1980s Las Vegas, increased gambling and hotel reservations ensured profits regardless of ticket sales. Likewise, the proliferation of pay-per-view television to individual homes rather than closed-circuit feeds at public places dramatically raised the television revenues against which purses were typically guaranteed, making ticket sales nearly irrelevant to fighters and promoters in boxing's biggest events. Yet the legacy of the brief window between 1973 and 1975, where the most expensive and lucrative prize fights to date occurred in transoceanic title bouts around the Global South, was firmly entrenched even after the boxing world's axis tilted toward Sin City. Michael Manley served two terms in Jamaica before losing an election in 1980, but rode his popularity to reelection in 1989. Similarly, Carlos Pérez lost the presidency of Venezuela in 1979 but was also reelected a decade later. Ferdinand Marcos maintained martial law until 1981 and stayed in power through 1986. In Zaire, Mobutu kept his hold over the country until 1996. The deep fault lines within an African American community in the midst of a Black freedom struggle were troubling at home, but set inside of a prize ring those divisions became valuable commodities toward cultural diplomacy for "third world" nations fighting for their place in a Cold War world.

Discussion Questions

1. How did American race relations affect Cold War geopolitics?
2. Which factors most deeply divided African Americans in the Black Freedom Struggle?
3. How can historians measure the impact of sports or pop culture on diplomacy?

The Main Event: Boxing in Nevada from the Mining Camps to the Las Vegas Strip (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2014).

Writing Prompt

Why were foreign governments interested in hosting sports events featuring American athletes?