

# *In the Cause of Peace: Muhammad Ali's Mission to Baghdad, 1990*

Stephen R. Wenn  
Wilfrid Laurier University, Ont.

Muhammad Ali's aura has diminished little since the curtain fell on his remarkable boxing career. Although Ali's last walk from the ring followed an unimpressive effort against Canada's Trevor Berbick in the Bahamas in late 1981, boxing analysts and writers have identified poor advice and Ali's deteriorating physical condition as mitigating factors in his increasingly lacklustre ring performances during the latter stages of this career. Although much has been written about Ali's Parkinson's Syndrome, his name still conjures up images of crisp jabs, dazzling footwork, ringside poetry recitations, and epic battles against the likes of Joe Frazier, George Foreman, and Sonny Liston.

Ali's consummate boxing skills, charisma, and religious beliefs brought him sporting acclaim and a prominent place in 20th century U.S. history. Stephen Brunt of the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper, perhaps said it best: "Muhammad Ali has had a way of intersecting with history, by chance or by design. With Malcolm X in Miami, defying the draft board in Houston, In Zaire [with George Foreman], with Saddam Hussein in Iraq," observed Brunt, "he transcended and continued to transcend to game that made him the most famous man on the planet."

Ali, a devout Muslim, has dedicated his life to charitable causes and the pursuit of international peace. His commitment to world peace and freedom was the

motivating force behind his mission to Baghdad, Iraq in November, 1990. With hostilities in the Middle East appearing inevitable, Ali journeyed to Baghdad in order to negotiate for the release of U.S. hostages held by Saddam Hussein. After ten days of intermittent negotiations, which involved Ali submitting to the indignity of a strip search prior to his audience with Saddam, he returned to the U.S. with 15 former captives.

This study is based on interviews and personal correspondence with U.S. diplomats who served in the region in the months leading up to the outbreak of the Gulf conflict, newspaper coverage, and secondary sources. A study of this mission is important for four reasons: Ali's involvement reflected his views on freedom and peace, as well as his unique ability as a sport figure to walk on the world's political stage; The mission revealed an element of Saddam's strategy to use foreign nationals as bargaining chips and tools for the manipulation of media coverage. The result of Ali's efforts foreshadowed the collapse of Iraq's "human shield" policy; Ali travelled to Iraq against the wishes of the Bush Administration which sought to limit Saddam Hussein's opportunities to manipulate the media for his own ends. The official position also reflected the U.S. policy to isolate Saddam and preclude his ability to generate sympathy from his Arab neighbours; and, Ali's "diplomatic" foray to Baghdad provided a curious contrast to his trip to Africa on behalf of President Jimmy Carter in 1980. Ali was asked by Carter to lobby five prominent African heads of state for support of the proposed U.S. boycott of the Moscow Olympics. In 1980, Carter exploited Ali's popularity and religion for the promotion of U.S. foreign policy. Ten years later, U.S. government officials feared that Ali would serve as a pawn for Saddam Hussein.

Although Ali's efforts in Africa were criticized severely in the U.S. press, reviews of his mission to Baghdad were more sympathetic. In the late 1970s, Ali had sought a role as an American goodwill ambassador. Following his return from Africa, Ali dispensed with such a notion because of his personal embarrassment, his financial situation, and the need for the adulation that the 'Tight game' provided. For many in American society, Ali's image was still incongruous with that of a traditional spokesperson on the world stage in 1980. By the end of the 1980s, people viewed Ali differently because of his Parkinson's Syndrome, but they also admired his dedication to numerous causes, his strong constitution which permitted him to maintain a gruelling travel schedule, and the sincerity of his beliefs. The image of the braggart from Louisville who challenged White America in the 1960s had faded due to changes in American society (improved race relations and changing public opinion about the Vietnam War) and Ali's own transition a process which began in the 1970s, from the talented sportman who stood beside Elijah Muhammad to a more conservative private citizen who looked to raise the spirits of all Americans and espoused a vision of America where racial harmony prevailed. Changing perceptions of Ali, his decade of efforts on behalf of numerous causes, and even his performance in Iraq have made him a more credible "unofficial ambassador" for many in U.S. society.