

***Muhammad Ali's Main Bout: African American Economic Power and the
World Heavyweight Title—by Michael Ezra***

Muhammad Ali announced at a press conference in January 1966 that he had formed a new corporation called Main Bout, Inc. to manage the multi-million-dollar promotional rights to his fights. “I am vitally interested in the company,” he said, “and in seeing that it will be one in which Negroes are not used as fronts, but as stockholders, officers, and production and promotion agents.” Although racially integrated, Main Bout was led by the all-black Nation of Islam. Its rise to this position gave African Americans control of boxing’s most valuable prize, the world heavyweight championship. Ali envisioned Main Bout as an economic network; a structure that would generate autonomy for African Americans.

Main Bout encountered resistance from the beginning. It came initially from white sportswriters. But about a month after Main Bout’s formation Ali’s draft status changed to 1-A, which meant that he had become eligible for military service in the Vietnam War. When Ali then opposed the war publicly, politicians nationwide joined the press in attacking Main Bout. The political controversy surrounding Ali made it easier for Main Bout’s economic competitors—rival promoters, closed-circuit television theater chains, and organized crime—to run the organization out of business. Money and politics were important elements of white resistance to Main Bout as was the organization’s potential as a black power symbol.

Like his civil rights contemporaries, Muhammad Ali understood the importance of economic power. Main Bout had the potential to share with black communities the heavyweight title’s enormous earning power. Ali told reporters at the press conference introducing Main Bout that the company would handle the ancillary rights to his fights, starting with a multi-million dollar March 29 match in Chicago against Ernie Terrell.

Main Bout had five stockholders. Herbert Muhammad, son of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, was its president. John Ali, the Nation of Islam’s national secretary, was Main Bout’s treasurer. Together they controlled 50 percent of its stock and half of its board’s six votes. The closed-circuit television operator Mike Malitz and his attorney Bob Arum were Main Bout’s vice-president and secretary; each held 20 percent of Main Bout’s stock and one vote. Jim Brown, the professional football player and Main Bout’s vice-president in charge of publicity, controlled one vote and 10 percent of the company. Malitz and Arum were Main Bout’s sole white members. They came up with the idea for the enterprise while promoting a 1965 fight for which they hired Brown to do closed-circuit television commentary. Malitz and Arum asked Brown to carry to the champion a proposal for a company that would allow Ali to control the finances of his fights and increase African American participation in their production. Brown passed the idea to Ali. Ali and the Nation of Islam approved the measure and Main Bout was the result.

Jim Brown emphasized Main Bout’s potential for increasing black economic power and control. He told a reporter, “Our goal is to use the money that we make—and hope to make in future ventures—to support the founding of business by Negroes. At first, we’ll have to count basically on small businesses.” Several months after Main Bout’s formation, Brown retired from professional football and founded the National Negro Industrial and Economic Union. Although Main Bout was not formally connected to the National Negro Industrial and Economic Union, their goals were similar. Both wanted to increase African American economic power. Muhammad Ali recognized this and donated \$10,000 to Brown’s group.

White sportswriters, including many of the day's top syndicated columnists, constituted the first wave of opposition to Main Bout. These reporters expressed fear over the Nation of Islam's ascent to power within professional boxing. Most were concerned with a black takeover of the sport. Gene Ward claimed, "Any way one sizes up this take-over of the heavyweight title by the Black Muslims, the fight game is going to be the worse for it. This could be the death blow." Jimmy Cannon wrote, "The fight racket has been turned into a crusade by the Muslims.... Herbert Muhammad, who is Elijah's kid, is the president of the firm that controls the Clay-Ernie Terrell promotion in Chicago. It is more than a fight. This is a fete to celebrate a religion that throws hate at people." Red Smith opined, "Except insofar as the Black Muslim leadership has a stake in the promotion, there is no good reason at present why the match should not be accepted." Doug Gilbert believed "that if the Muslims own Clay, and also own the television rights to all of his fights, they have what amounts to a hammerlock on all that's lucrative in boxing." The editorial boards of two Chicago newspapers, the *Daily News* and the *Tribune*, urged Illinois Governor Otto Kerner to ban the upcoming bout.

In February 1966, less than a month after Main Bout's formation, the U.S. Selective Service reclassified Muhammad Ali as draft-eligible for the Vietnam War. When reporters called Ali for comment, he signified his political and religious opposition to the Vietnam War. His draft resistance and an escalating distrust of Main Bout unleashed furious attacks by Chicago newspapers and politicians who called for a ban of the upcoming match with Ernie Terrell. Editorials in two local dailies lobbied for cancellation of the fight, citing Ali's anti-Vietnam stance and his new promotional scheme. The *Chicago Tribune* found it "deplorable that so many Chicagoans are unwittingly encouraging [Ali] by their interest in a fight whose profits will go largely to the Black Muslims." Chicago Mayor Richard Daley leaned on the Illinois State Athletic Commission to "reconsider" the bout, claiming that Chicago "could well do without this fight." Illinois Governor Kerner called Ali's comments "disgusting and unpatriotic." Aided by the local press, white city and state politicians formed a nearly united front against the match within a matter of days.

Illinois Attorney General William Clark declared the match illegal. Mayor Daley backed the decision: "The attorney general has issued an opinion holding the fight illegal. All state officials are bound by the opinion of the attorney general. It seems to me the commission has no other choice but to follow the opinion." The Illinois State Athletic Commission acquiesced and cancelled the match. The *Chicago Tribune* praised Daley, Kerner, and Clark for intervening.

Refusing to apologize reinforced Ali's defiance and engendered nationwide opposition to his upcoming title fight with Terrell. Unwelcome in Chicago, Main Bout shopped the contest around the United States with little success. Area promoters in each locale greeted Main Bout with interest but state and local government officials rejected them. Promoters in South Dakota, Rhode Island, Maine, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Missouri asked about holding the bout in their states but were blocked. The pattern was clear: as soon as the news broke somewhere that promoters were interested in the fight, government officials would oppose them. With the contest less than a month away, Main Bout had yet to secure a site. Main Bout shopped the match around Canada but the same pattern developed. Promoters in Montreal, Sorrels, Edmonton, and Verdun talked with Main Bout but their city governments blocked the fight in opposition to Ali's antiwar stance. The Ontario Minister of Labor finally agreed to host the contest in Toronto but even there the fight stirred controversy.

Almost immediately after Toronto approved the contest, Ernie Terrell withdrew citing financial considerations, forcing Main Bout to find a substitute opponent in Canadian

heavyweight George Chuvalo. Terrell's real reason for dropping out was more than financial. It was in fact motivated by the Chicago Mafia, who threatened to kill him if he went through with the bout.

In the span of four weeks, the promotion had gone bust. A month earlier, the Associated Press had predicted gross receipts of over \$4,000,000 and a minimum purse of \$450,000 for Ali. The day after Main Bout announced that it had signed Chuvalo, however, the Associated Press reported that the fight's gross would be approximately \$500,000. Although there had been radio broadcasts of all of Ali's previous title matches, only a handful of the fight's forty-two sponsors agreed to support the bout. The radio broadcast had to be cancelled. Sportswriters asked readers to stay away from the bout. The most crippling blow to the promotion, by far, was its abandonment by closed-circuit television theater chains. Main Bout had contracted 280 North American closed-circuit television venues to show the Terrell fight, but only 32 sites ended up showing the match against Chuvalo

Thus, the Ali-Chuvalo fight was financially disastrous, although fans saw a good boxing match that Ali won by fifteen-round unanimous decision. The closed-circuit telecast sold about 46,000 tickets for \$110,000. This gross take was 20-to-40 times less than closed-circuit revenues from each of Ali's three previous championship fights. The \$150,000 on-site, live gate was also lower than for each of Ali's previous title bouts. Furthermore, Ali's \$60,000 purse was approximately a tenth of those for each of his three previous bouts and at least three times less than for any fight of his championship career.

Realizing that he might not be able to fight under Main Bout at home, Ali considered matches outside the United States. He was nervous about this possibility at first. "They want to stop me from fighting. They done run me out of the country.... This [the Chuvalo match] could be my last fight," the champion told Phil Pepe. He revealed to Milton Gross, "I don't want to go [abroad]. I want to defend my title here somewhere or even in a phone booth or on a barge at sea." By the end of March, however, Ali had reconciled his doubts. "I'm not fighting for money," he said, "but for the freedom of American black people to speak their minds." He admitted to a Louisville reporter that he would like to fight in the United States, "But they can put it in England, Nigeria, France, or Rome if they want to. I don't care about the money. It's a world title I got, not a U.S.A. title, and it can be defended anywhere in the world." During an interview with Larry Merchant, Ali fanned himself with a replica passport and insisted that he would fight wherever he would be allowed. Ali's most eloquent expression of this outlook was recorded by Robert Lipsyte. "Boxing is nothing, just satisfying some bloodthirsty people. I'm no longer Cassius Clay, a Negro from Kentucky. I belong to the world, the black world. I'll always have a home in Pakistan, in Algeria, in Ethiopia. This is more than money," he said. "I'm not disturbed and nervous. Why should I be? In a few hours I could fly to another country, in the East, in Africa, where people love me. Millions, all over the world want to see me. Why should I worry about losing a few dollars." The champion concluded, "I'm not going to sell my manhood for a few dollars, or a smile. I'd rather be poor and free than rich and a slave." Such comments foreshadowed Main Bout's decision to take the champion's next three matches to Europe, where there had not been a world heavyweight title contest in more than 30 years. The three European fights earned Ali purses far more lucrative than he had received for the match in Canada with Chuvalo and reestablished him as the top drawing power in boxing.

Muhammad Ali's conviction on draft evasion charges in June 1967 ended Main Bout's run after only seventeen months, so it is difficult to assess the company's impact. Main Bout's economic goals seem to have been threefold: 1) negotiate good purses for Ali; 2) make money

for its shareholders; 3) create wealth and employment for blacks. It would appear they accomplished the first two goals but not the third. Main Bout's early demise, however, makes it impossible to know if it could have become capable of making money and creating jobs for substantial numbers of African Americans.

Main Bout's collapse ultimately stemmed from its lack of political power rather than from economic pressure. State athletic commissions nationwide colluded to unanimously refuse Ali a boxing license after his indictment in May 1967. If any state athletic commission had sanctioned an Ali fight, he would have fought in that state. Following his conviction, Ali stayed out of prison on appeal, but his passport was invalidated, eliminating his chances of fighting abroad. Realizing Ali was finished, Arum, Malitz, and Brown left Main Bout to form their own company, Sports Action, Inc., which would promote the tournament designed to replace Ali as heavyweight champion. The Nation of Islam and Ali were frozen out of professional boxing and Ali did not fight professionally for the next three-and-a-half years.