Joshua D. Clark  
CMN. 650 –  
Prof. James

**URC PRESENTATION:**

The film that I looked at for this project was the 2001 film *Ali*, directed by Michael Mann and starring Will Smith as Muhammad Ali. The film takes place during perhaps 10 of the most turbulent years (1964-1974) that America has ever endured. Over the course of the decade the nation dealt with the conflict in Vietnam escalating into a war, racial tension spreading across the whole of the country, and fundamental changes in both American values and beliefs. Muhammad Ali found himself placed among the center of the turmoil as he became involved in some way in each of these facets. From refusing induction into the U.S. Army based on religious and personal beliefs, to befriending Malcolm X and joining the Nation of Islam to watching as both Malcolm and Martin Luther King, Jr. are assassinated.

Due to his personal involvement in so many of the hot-button issues that were facing the nation at that time, Ali is an ideal person to examine when talking about values in our country. He conducted himself in a proud manner and fought for himself and his way of life inside the ring and out. Never did he back down or compromise for the benefit of others. These are all traits that are rewarded and lauded in our society but to examine the man more closely we realize that he was a flawed person who cheated on his wives, flamed the fires of his ego, and indulged too much time and energy into shaping the perfect public persona. Ali was a model for some of the inherent values of our country (pride, resilience, truth to self) but he was also responsible for helping to shape some of the new attitudes and values that would come to be socially acceptable (public recognition, selfishness, radical thought).

The following clip shows Ali after he has spoken out against the Vietnam war following his arrest for refusing induction. In the scene, he is attending a hearing
with the boxing commission to decide whether or not they will revoke his boxing license.

Amir Saeed's article "What's in a name? Muhammad Ali and the Politics of Cultural Identity" states that 'sport was the only arena in which blacks were able to assert themselves'. Ali certainly expresses himself inside the ring with one of the greatest careers in boxing history but he also managed to make his voice heard on issues not having anything to do with boxing, or sport.

Even as he faced expulsion from the sport he loved and his livelihood, Ali would not give in. He could have sat before those men and stated that what he said was wrong and that he was deeply sorry for it. He wouldn't have to mean it; he would just have to say it. But his convictions and his beliefs were so strong that he absolutely refused to be untrue to himself. In that regard he was acting as the people's champion. By not perjuring himself he maintained purity and a sense of dignity that every person should desire to be imbued with. Ali was showing what strength was by standing against the United States Government. This was seen as an act that a true patriot and a true hero would not engage in; a real role-model and voice of the people would do what is deemed right and noble by society's standards, not their own. But Ali was speaking for the people; the people who were afraid to speak out and say what they felt. He became the voice for a minority and in doing so alienated most of the country. In this regard, he was the people's champion.

Unafraid to speak his mind, Ali did not let his professional and public status keep him from being honest and forthright. In today's world, public figures rarely answer any question with sincerity or honesty. They are afraid to ruin their public persona, and therefore they stick to scripted answers and politically correct responses. What Ali did is almost impossible for me to imagine in today's world? Opposition to the current war has become commonplace; the adverse feelings towards the actual conflict is ubiquitous. But during the late 60's, it was revolutionary, not just for an athlete to speak out on political or social issues, but for a black athlete to do so. And to do so in a way that brought to the surface issues of racism and inequality was remarkable. America was supposed to be the shining
symbol of equality and democracy to the rest of the world. But the reality was that racism had permeated every aspect of our culture.

Cassius Clay grew up as a lower middle-class black child in Louisville, Kentucky where racism and segregation were part of society. The beginning of the film shows young Clay walking to the back of a bus and seeing the front-page photograph of a lynched black. He had to endure racial taunts, threats, and handicaps placed on him because of the color of his skin. But he overcame the prejudice of others and focused on his training to become a champion. When he was in the ring as a fighter he was a champion but as soon as he was outside of those ropes he was just another black man. He was not afforded the same liberties or rights as everybody else.

Upon converting to Islam, Ali ran into even more issues. It was hard enough for a black man to succeed in that day and age but to convert to a religion that was viewed as radical and possibly a threat to white-America was truly courageous. By changing his name to Muhammad Ali because he no longer wanted the slave name of Cassius Clay he set himself apart from any sports figure of his time.

Saeed’s article also states that “...the early black boxing pioneers were more than just fighters; they automatically became symbols of their communities.” When we imagine American sports heroes, the image that one conjures in their mind is typically a clean-cut white athlete. He says the right things, smiles all the time, and is a proud American, through and through. But for an entire race of people, they did not have many people to look up to in the world of sports. Ali stood out as someone who did not try to blend into white-American culture. He acted the way he wanted, and he did what he felt was right. At one point during the film, Ali states, “I ain’t got to be what nobody else want me to be and I ain’t afraid to be what I wanna be, think how I wanna think.” He became a bastion of pride and power for black-America at a time where racism was not just a social taboo, but a very real and dangerous reality. Ali’s voice and spirit helped to give strength to those who had begun to lose hope, and his eventual victory over the United States Gov’t demonstrated that perseverance could produce results.
Although he did it in an unconventional manner, Muhammad Ali was a hero who lived by a set of values and helped to show the world that righteousness could overcome anything.