

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Ali set the right example

?Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them.?

William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night

Muhammed Ali called himself ?the greatest,? which in most cases would have been a slight overstatement.

While we tend to confer ?great? and ?greatness? too freely, Ali, the former boxer who died last week at age 74, truly did deserve the mantle of genuine greatness.

Quite apart from his boxing prowess and his endless work for racial equality ? particularly coming from the South at a time when just being black was cause for offence ? one thing I admired most about Ali, originally known as Cassius Clay, was his stance on the Vietnam War.

It's not whether you agree or disagree with his refusal to fight in that conflict. Instead, unlike some 100,000 other Americans who fled to Canada rather than fight, Ali not only remained true to his beliefs as a conscientious objector, but was also willing to take the punishment. He went to jail rather than hightail it across the border.

Which brings me to the current campaign here to get Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to reverse the efforts of the previous Tory regime to send the Iraq War deserters ? or ?resisters? as their supporters prefer to call them ? back to face the music in the U.S., just as Ali did those many years ago.

In a recent essay in the Toronto Star, former CBC radio host Andy Barrie, who deserted to Canada Dec. 23, 1969 ? two years after Ali was sentenced to five years and banned from boxing for three years for draft evasion ? writes an open plea to Trudeau to end prosecution against the 15 known active cases of conscientious objectors in Canada.

Barrie was given a conscientious objector status by his local draft board ? which is fair enough ? but bolted to Canada and launched a successful broadcasting career after being trained as a non-combatant medic and ordered deployed to Vietnam.

It is important to remember that the Vietnam deserters hadn't volunteered. They were conscripted. On the other hand, the Iraq deserters voluntarily signed up for service ? no doubt aware there was a war going on at the time (and still is, despite Barack Obama's hollow promises to get the U.S. out of wars) but then reneged on their commitments when the military actually expected them to put their boots where their signatures were.

Even those who were conscripted ? since that was the law at the time ? had a duty to obey the law or face the consequences. Ali, just starting his remarkable boxing career, understood that and took his punishment. Deserters such as Barrie did not.

And now Barrie wants Trudeau to free the current batch from any legal consequences for their actions.

Sadly, during the recent election, Trudeau openly criticized Harper for sending deserters back and promised to end the practice. He accused the Tories of ?lacking compassion and lack understanding.?

Compassion has nothing to do with the issue. It's about legal obligations.

Barrie writes, ?These people (resisters) broke no laws in Canada and we have no business enforcing American law . . .?

This is not only morally vacuous, it's also wrong. As Lauren Heuser wrote in a recent National Post essay, ? . . . military desertion is a criminal offence in Canada. Under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, a person is ineligible for permanent residency if he has committed an offence in Canada or an offence elsewhere that would constitute an offence here.? In addition, there are legal treaty obligations which can hardly be dismissed out of hand.

And really, do we want to be able to send our own deserters to jail while allowing American deserters to come here and live their lives unmolested. Really?

What's more, if you extend Barrie's logic here, do we want a safe haven for anybody who commits a crime in the U.S., or anywhere else, to skedaddle to Canada and live happily ever after? Think about it.

The argument for the current resisters is, as said earlier, even more tendentious when you consider the fact they weren't drafted; they volunteered for service, only to bolt when actually expected to serve. If you don't want to fight, don't sign up. Period.

Oh yes, Barrie and others argue that the volunteers, since so many are black and from poor neighborhoods, were conned into service by the military. How typical of brilliant liberals to conclude that these people were simply too stupid not to understand what they were doing.

It's not as if the deserters will be shot upon their return ? our laws specifically exempt sending anyone back to face capital punishment ? but they will be court-martialed and likely do time.

And that's as it should be. It's one thing to stand for something. It's another, as Ali showed, to be prepared to accept the consequences.

