

**THIS WAY FOR BLACK EMPOWERMENT**

**"When We Were Kings" is a knockout**

By Dr. Lenora Fulani  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Politics and psychology are my great passions. But like most of you, in my spare time I go to the movies. And since it's Academy Award season, I thought I'd write about one movie — which just won the Oscar for the best documentary. It's called *When We Were Kings*, the story of the Ali-Foreman fight in Zaire in 1974. And let me tell you, it's the greatest!



DR. LENORA FULANI

This film was directed by Leon Gast, who was a guest on my weekly television show several days after he won the Oscar. It was 22 years in the making, delayed by problems with the financing and legal obstacles. And the story of making the movie is nearly as interesting as the story of the fight.

The real story of the film starts in 1973 when Don King got both Ali and Foreman to give him an option to fight each for \$5 million each. King got the signatures, but then he needed the \$10 million. He and other promoters approached President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and asked him to sponsor both the Ali-Foreman fight and a music festival that would bring together African performers like Miriam Makeba and Americans like James Brown and B.B. King. There were also plans to film the extravaganza — a kind of "Black Woodstock." Gast applied for the job as director, but the promoters were concerned that a white director would not have the sensitivity to make a film about black performers in Africa. (Gast had previously made films on Latin music and was working on a documentary about the Grateful Dead and the Hell's Angels.) With the stipulation that half his crew be black, he got the job.

The "Rumble in the Jungle" was scheduled for September 25, 1974, and the music festival was supposed to take place during the three preceding days. But on September 20, George Foreman got a cut about his right eye during a training session, and the fight had to be postponed for six weeks. The music festival went forward anyway (the musicians couldn't hang around for six weeks), but the main event was canceled, most of the thousands of journalists and Westerners who had come picked up and left, and there was practically no audience for the event, which was to take place in a stadium built for 100,000 people. (This is the same stadium that the anti-Mobutu democracy movement used for its rallies in the early '90's) They ended up making it a free festival, which filled the stadium but wiped out the money earmarked to finish the "Black Woodstock" film.

To protect his own investment of \$14 million, Mobutu prevented the fighters and their entourages from leaving the country. Gast hung around and shot a lot of footage of the fighters, and the film became more a documentary about Ali than a "Black Woodstock."

One splendid feature of the movie is that it shows Ali meeting and interacting with Zairians. Unlike Foreman, he was well-known in Africa, not only as a champion boxer, but also for the political stance he took in 1967, refusing to be drafted to fight the

Vietnamese who, as Ali pointed out, "never did him any harm." Ali was a minister in the Nation of Islam and refused induction on religious grounds. He was sentenced to five years in jail and a \$10,000 fine, and forced to relinquish his title and retire from boxing. In 1971, the Supreme Court overturned his conviction, but it took him several years to work his way back to the top.

Gast and his camera followed Ali walking around Kinshasa and you get to see a bit of the rarely photographed city laid out on the banks of the Congo River. The film also flashes back to 1965 showing Patrice Lumumba being dragged through the streets of Zaire (then the Congo) by CIA-instigated assassins. Even at the time of the fight, 1974, before Mobutu's power was seriously challenged as it is today, there is hardly a single shot of a city street where there aren't security forces brutalizing the onlookers. Giant pictures of Mobutu are everywhere. The film shows the stadium where the concerts took place and explained how underneath the bleachers and the arena are holding cells used for prisoners. During the period preceding the "Rumble in the Jungle" there were a few criminal incidents in which some white foreigners were killed. Worried that the incidents would discourage tourist, Mobutu rounded up a thousand of Kinshasa's criminals and held them under the stadium. Then he had one hundred of them taken out and summarily executed, to send a message to the others, and their cohorts.

The fight was finally held on October 30, with Foreman the favorite. But Ali prevailed in the eighth round.

After Gast returned to New York, he discovered that the company that was supposed to reimburse him for all the money he laid out for the film, "International Films and Records," was some off-shore shell of a company owned by Stephen A. Tolbert, the Minister of Finance of Liberia and a member of that country's ruling family, which was soon overthrown in a bloody coup by Samuel Doe. All the financing fell through. Gast owned the boxes of film and audio tape, but the chances of finding a backer to make a film centered on Ali seemed dim, because the market was saturated.

Gast worked on editing the film in his apartment, from time to time sending clips to Ali, who loved it. One thing scaring away potential backers was the issue of all the musical copyright questions that needed to be settled first. Also, Gast had no actual footage of the fight itself, and had to acquire rights to use the broadcast tape, which at the time was only shown on a closed-circuit feed. Gast's lawyer, David Sonenberg, worked on these issues and put up \$400,000 of his own money to finish the film. When

We Were Kings was finally completed and shown at the Sundance Film Festival where 17 offers to buy the film were made. Go out and see this movie when it comes to your neighborhood theater. It tells the story of a great athlete and an inspiring individual with depth, compassion and excitement. Don't miss it.



Muhammad Ali

**POINT OF VIEW**



**TO BE EQUAL**

**Economic power: The next civil rights frontier**

By Hugh B. Price  
President

National Urban League

Three decades ago African-Americans in the South won back the political and civil rights that had been taken from them by dint of great courage, hard work, and a steely sense of purpose.

But securing those rights actually meant that black Americans would be able to shift more of their energy to the struggle to establish themselves as an economically-secure group. Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney M. Young, Jr., and Malcolm X were only the most notable of many who in the mid-1960s saw that gaining and wisely using economic power was the next civil rights frontier.

African-Americans are still on the frontier as we approach the beginning of the 21st century, and our journey to a place of security and safety remains challenging.

Indeed, even as we take stock of and appreciate the significant progress we have made since the 1960s, we must intensify our efforts to gain economic strength.

We must do this because the economic pressures on nations, ethnic groups, and individual families have intensified, driven by that remarkable phenomenon called globalization. The world is on the march economically. Everywhere you look, you will find a deep commitment to free-market economic activity. Those who do not march in step with it are more than likely going to be run over and left in the dust.

This is the world that Americans, and particularly those of us who are African-American, have to prepare ourselves and our children to navigate. We must spread an acute sense of economic awareness and entrepreneurial energy among more African-Americans so that more of us can be in a position to march in

step with the new globally-oriented economy.

Contrary to assumptions, this focus is nothing new for black America. The extraordinary development of black businesses from the end of the Civil War through the 1920s proved that African-Americans possessed a tremendous entrepreneurial spirit. It was just that spirit which the Supreme Court's Plessy decision of 1896 was meant to destroy. It never did, despite all the barriers it put in the way.

Now, despite the barriers which still exist, we must make that zest for economic achievement soar. And we must do so across many sectors of the society.

We must husband our individual and collective resources and invest them wisely in order to acquire the wealth — net financial assets — which will enable us to lessen our dependence on income — the weekly paycheck. In that way we will be able to more powerfully direct our philanthropy to support such black institutions as our local churches and historically black colleges and universities and those of the larger society.

We must increase our ownership of businesses, small, medium-sized and large; and build up local business districts



HUGH B. PRICE

in black neighborhoods, in the suburbs as well as inner cities, so that we can provide jobs for residents of those areas and truly possess the land on which we live; and increase the number of African-Americans holding significant positions in the revenue-producing divisions of Corporate America.

Finally, we must convince many more of our young people that the pursuit of academic excellence is important, so that they will later be able to pursue economic power for themselves and their people.

The two issues are inextricably intertwined: African-American youth must have the skills and the inspiration necessary to compete at a world-class level if African-Americans as a group are to build up their economic strength and security.

That the pursuit of  
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