The complexities of life and death and the pursuit of happiness are not lost on Dmitriy Salita. This is a man who left his place of birth – Odessa, Ukraine – because of rampant anti-Semitism. He came to the United States at the age of nine, traded one form of prejudice for another, but ultimately found his peace. It was, of all places, inside a boxing ring.

What he also found in Brooklyn was his faith. When he arrived here he was exposed to Orthodox Judaism and became an observant Jew. He strictly follows Jewish law – if he has a fight on a Saturday, it must begin after sundown, the end of the Sabbath. And maybe that's what life is all about, sacrificing something to find something else. Be it your home, your religion or your profession. Salita knows sacrifice, but when you get to the core of Dmitriy Salita, it is all about faith.

But his faith is more than just spiritual, he has faith in the American dream and faith that his talents will take him to the top of the boxing world.

The world in which we all travel is not very simple, boxing or otherwise. Perhaps every solution merely poses another question. Life is a lot like a good counterpuncher. In December, Salita, an unbeaten junior welterweight, was invited to the White House to have Chanukah dinner with President George Bush and the First Lady.

Talk about a counterpunch? It surely had to be an interesting time to be in Bush's presence, as he contemplated the notion of sending more American troops overseas to fight an increasingly unpopular war. Events such as this are not about politics. And nor should they be.

"It is a great honor to be going to the White House," Salita said, who was also Bush's guest in 2005. "I am really living my American dream and meeting the President was very farfetched for me a few years ago as I was one of the kids hitting the heavy bag in Starrett City boxing club."

When you find yourself standing next to the most powerful man in the free world, it is indeed a pinch-me moment. "It was surreal," he said. "I immigrated to this country when I was a young boy. My family was on welfare and struggling to get by. A few years later you get the chance to meet The President of the United States. To me it shows the greatness of this country it is truly a land of opportunity."

Yes, Salita knows about immigration and that the borders are tightening. It wasn't something he discussed at the White House, but just look around at the guys training next to him at Gleason's Gym and the immigration debate takes on a new meaning.

"I don't know enough about immigration law to have all the answers," he said. "But with the safety situation that America has encountered, I feel that the government has to check and double-check everyone that comes in to this country."

The Chanukah celebration at the White House also included the annual Menorah lighting by the President. While the occasion was one of celebration, Salita fully understood that the specter of Iraq looms over the current administration.

"As far as the war in Iraq goes, it's a long and a controversial subject," Salita said. "I think that it was brave of the President to take a firm stand on a war against terrorism. It's very easy to have an opinion on these issues, however I am not a professional in this area. I leave that up to the elected officials. I support the troops, they are real and true heroes and my prayers are with them and their families."

Salita, an intelligent and introspective young man, was not invited to the White House to talk politics. It was a celebration of his faith and success and hard work. He arrived with Jimmy O'Pharrow, the man who nurtured him at the Starrett City Gym. Somehow, Salita said, eating at the White House made the food taste better. They were surrounded by oil paintings and history and fine china and a security detail second-to-none.

"There is a certain strong positive aura at the White House," he said. "It kind of feels like a palace. The security was tight but not where it made you feel uncomfortable. It was similar to being screened at the airport but the lines were a lot smaller.

"One thing that stood out in my mind – it's kind of funny I guess – but the napkins were so fine and so thick they seemed like towels. I took one for a souvenir."

A few weeks after Salita arrived back in New York, another immigrant boxer, Kemal Kolenovic, was murdered in the Bronx while trying to play the role of peacemaker during an altercation. He was born in Montenegro in the former Yugoslavia and was chasing the American Dream that Salita speaks of. It was New Year's Eve and he was 16 days removed from his 10th pro victory. There would be no more. That was life, back in the role of counterpuncher. Kolenovic was a young man who may not have been as talented as Salita, but one who worked just as hard and spilled his blood just as gamely in the ring. His DNA, like Salita's and all the others at Gleason's, is spread across boxing rings, inside boxing gyms, all over the Northeast.

"I knew Kemal," said Salita. "He was a hard worker and always gave his all in the ring. It's very tragic. He will be missed. He was a staple in the New York boxing scene."

So too is Salita. Has been a staple for quite some time. In 2007, he is hoping to make the

transition from staple to superstar. Fighting is where life gets simple for Salita. When he steps within the boundaries of the braided rope, Salita controls his destiny. Boxing is not a utopia, nor is the White House. Whether you are in a tuxedo or trunks, the thugs, the racists and the thieves are there. And while triumph and tragedy and honor swirled in and out of Salita's life in December, he was most comfortable looking forward.

He was looking forward to getting back into the ring, where there are those special nights when the punches are snapping and the combinations are flowing and his sport is elevated to art. The ring can still be that place where a man's will and his faith are justly rewarded. To stand there,

with crowd pulsating, the noise rising, with your hand raised in the air, well above the ring – that is Dmitriy Salita's American dream.