



Legislation Text

File #: Res 0804-2005, **Version:** *

Res. No. 804

Resolution in support of a posthumous presidential pardon of former boxing great John Arthur “Jack” Johnson for his racially-motivated conviction in 1913 and calling upon President George W. Bush to exercise his constitutional authority to grant a pardon in this case.

By Council Members Vann, Seabrook, The Speaker (Council Member Miller), Avella, Baez, Barron, Clarke, Comrie, Fidler, Foster, Gennaro, James, Jennings, Katz, Koppell, Liu, McMahon, Monserrate, Nelson, Quinn, Reed, Sanders Jr., Weprin, Recchia Jr., Brewer, Perkins and The Public Advocate (Ms. Gotbaum)

Whereas, John Arthur “Jack” Johnson was born on March 31, 1878 in Galveston, Texas, the second of six children born to Henry and Tiny Johnson, both of whom were former slaves; and

Whereas, Jack Johnson, reputedly had his first fight at the age of fifteen and subsequently fought in “Battle Royals,” matches in which African-American boys were blindfolded by white men and told to box in order to entertain white spectators who would toss money at the winner; and

Whereas, Jack Johnson began fighting professionally in 1897 at the age of 18, traveling throughout the country as a boxer and earning between \$5 and \$10 a night; and

Whereas, On February 3, 1903, Jack Johnson defeated “Denver” Ed Martin over twenty rounds of boxing to win the unofficial “Negro Heavyweight Championship;” and

Whereas, Many times during his professional career, Jack Johnson was denied the opportunity to fight for boxing’s all-around heavyweight championship title because the white champions of that time refused to give a title shot to a boxer who was black; and

Whereas, On December 26, 1908, Jack Johnson stopped Tommy Burns in the 14th round of their heavyweight title match in Sydney, Australia to become boxing’s first African-American Heavyweight Champion of the World; and

Whereas, Jack Johnson successfully defended his heavyweight championship title many times in a series of matches with fighters dubbed the “great white hope,” even defeating James J. Jeffries, a former white champion who had previously refused to fight him; and

Whereas, In July 1910, the United States Congress enacted the Mann Act, which outlawed the transportation of women in interstate or foreign commerce “for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose;” and

Whereas, On November 7, 1912, Jack Johnson was arrested on what has now been established as trumped up charges of violating the Mann Act and was sentenced in 1913 to a year and a day in federal prison, actions that would eventually cause him to flee the country and live in exile in Canada and Europe for several years; and

Whereas, In a heavyweight championship match that took place in Havana, Cuba on April 15, 1915 while he was living in exile, Jack Johnson lost his title to Jess Willard, a white challenger who was ten years younger; and

Whereas, On July 20, 1920, Jack Johnson returned to the United States and surrendered to federal authorities, who sent him to Leavenworth Prison in Kansas to serve the one year sentence imposed on him in 1913; and

Whereas, After being released from Leavenworth prison on July 9, 1921 at the age of 43, Jack Johnson continued to box, but after suffering two losses in 1928, only participated in exhibition matches; and

Whereas, In the early 1920’s, Jack Johnson opened an establishment at 42nd Street and Lenox Avenue, in Manhattan, called Club De Lux, which in 1923 would eventually come under new ownership and renamed the Cotton Club; and

Whereas, Jack Johnson died in a car accident on June 10, 1946 at the age of 68 and was buried in Chicago, Illinois after a funeral service that was attended by approximately 2500 people; and

Whereas, On July 13, 2004 a group of political and civil rights leaders, boxing experts and artists,

including documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, formed the Committee to Pardon Jack Johnson and filed a petition with the United States Department of Justice seeking a posthumous presidential pardon for Jack Johnson; and

Whereas, The Committee to Pardon Jack Johnson has the support of United States Senators John McCain, Edward Kennedy and Orrin Hatch, as well as Representatives Charles Rangel, Eddie Bernice Johnson and Jesse Jackson, Jr. and former New York City Mayor David N. Dinkins; and

Whereas, The Constitution of the United States empowers the President to grant presidential pardons; and

Whereas, In a petition filed with the United States Department of Justice, the Committee to Pardon Jack Johnson asks the President to pardon Johnson because “his conviction was the result solely of contrived charges reflecting attitudes and mores that America has long since outgrown; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Council of the City of New York supports a posthumous presidential pardon for former boxing great John Arthur “Jack” Johnson for his racially-motivated conviction in 1913 and calls upon President George W. Bush to exercise his constitutional authority to grant a pardon in this case.

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LS#2375
2/15/2005
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