



June 21, 2016

The U.S. Commission On Civil Rights Statement Requesting The Posthumous Pardon Of John Arthur “Jack” Johnson

70 years ago this month, John Arthur “Jack” Johnson died in a car accident on June 10, 1946.¹ Mr. Johnson, the son of former slaves, rose to become boxing’s Heavyweight Champion of the World in 1908 and was inducted into the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1954.

An outspoken and controversial figure in his day, Mr. Johnson was initially denied the opportunity to fight for the heavyweight title because the championship was closed to African-Americans. He was a fierce critic of Jim Crow laws and the prevailing enforced customs of racial segregation. After he gained the title, white Americans began a search for a white boxer who could defeat Mr. Johnson, an effort dubbed the search for “the great white hope.” Jim Jefferies, an undefeated former champion, agreed to come out of retirement to fight Mr. Johnson as a result of this search. Mr. Johnson’s victory in that fight sparked riots across the country; white mobs attacked and murdered African-Americans.

Racial resentment against Mr. Johnson was heightened by his relationships with white women. On October 18, 1912, he was arrested on a charge that his relationship with a white woman, Lucille Cameron, violated the Mann Act, which prohibited interstate and foreign transportation of women and girls “for immoral

¹ Biographical information is taken from Congressional findings in a resolution calling for Mr. Johnson’s pardon, passed as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act, Pub.L. 114-95, December 10, 2015, 129 Stat 1802; *see also* Theresa Runstedtler, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line*, University of California Press, 2012; William C. Rhoden, “A Century Later, Jack Johnson Waits a Nation’s Absolution,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2015 *available at* http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/04/sports/a-century-later-jack-johnson-awaits-a-nations-absolution.html?_r=0.

purposes.”² Ms. Cameron refused to cooperate with the prosecution and the two married shortly thereafter. Mr. Johnson was arrested again less than a month later on charges stemming from his relationship with a different white woman years earlier. He was convicted by an all-white jury in 1913 and sentenced to one year and one day in federal prison.

Mr. Johnson fled the country to avoid prison. He lost the heavyweight title in 1915, and returned to the United States in 1920. He turned himself over to federal authorities and served out his sentence. He never regained the championship title.

Congress has repeatedly called for the President to posthumously pardon Mr. Johnson for the racially motivated conviction he endured. Most recently, the Senate with the concurrence of the House of Representatives passed a resolution calling for his pardon on December 9, 2015.

70 years after his death, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, by unanimous vote, joins the 114th Congress in requesting the President to right this century-old wrong. As W. E. B. Du Bois said, “The reason Jack Johnson was so beset by his own country, a country ironically which had only recently reaffirmed that all men were created equal, was because of his unforgivable blackness.” We strongly urge President Obama to pardon Jack Johnson.

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The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is an independent, bipartisan agency charged with advising the President and Congress on civil rights matters and issuing a federal civil rights enforcement report. For information about Commission’s reports and meetings, visit <http://www.usccr.gov>.

² The Mann Act, *available at* http://www.pbs.org/unforgivableblackness/knockout/mannact_text.html.