

Congress Passes Jack Johnson Resolution

Written by Aaron Tallent
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Congress has approved a resolution urging President Barack Obama to grant a posthumous pardon to Jack Johnson for his 1913 conviction on the Mann Act. Yesterday, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the resolution, which was first introduced in Congress in 2004, by voice vote. The Senate approved the legislation on June 24.

"I'm pleased the House has joined the Senate in passing a resolution to express the sense of Congress that Jack Johnson, the best heavyweight fighter of his era, should receive a posthumous pardon for being convicted of violating the Mann Act in 1913," said Senator John McCain [R-AZ], the lead sponsor of the Senate resolution.

The Mann Act (otherwise known as the White Slave Traffic Act) was established in 1910 and prohibited transporting women across state lines "for the purpose of debauchery or for any other immoral purposes." In 1912, federal prosecutors attempted to prosecute Johnson for his relationship with Lucille Cameron, whose mother had accused the champion of abducting her daughter. Those charges were nullified when Johnson and Cameron married. The federal government did, however, convict Johnson of violating the Mann Act with Belle Schreiber, a prostitute who Johnson had sometimes traveled with and introduced as his wife.

Johnson had won the heavyweight title from Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia in 1908 and held the belt for seven years. His most famous bout was his knockout of former heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries in 1910. Prompted by many sportswriters, most notably Jack London, Jeffries came out of retirement to face Johnson in what was billed as the "Battle of the Century". While Jeffries retired undefeated and Johnson was at his professional peak, the designation was mainly the result of the bout being viewed as a contest of racial superiority.

Upon his conviction, Johnson left in the United States, defending his title twice in France. In 1915, he lost his belt to Jess Willard in Havana, Cuba after being knocked out in the 26th round. After losing, Johnson remained in exile, fighting in Spain and Mexico to make a living. On July 20, 1920, Johnson crossed the U.S./Mexican border and served his one year and one day sentence in the Federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas. He continued to box until 1938 but never again challenged for the heavyweight title. The next African-American fighter to do so was Joe Louis in 1937.

Johnson died in a car accident in 1946 on his way to the rematch between Louis and Billy Conn. In 1986, Congress amended the act, replacing the words debauchery and immoral purposes with the language "any sexual activity for which any person can be charged with a criminal offense."

The resolution states that the pardon should be given to Johnson "to expunge a racially motivated abuse of the prosecutorial authority of the Federal Government from the annals of criminal justice in the United States" and recognize Johnson's athletic and cultural contributions to society.

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“Jack Johnson is a legendary boxer, who became a victim of the times with a wrongly-placed, racially-motivated conviction,” said Rep. Pete King [R-NY], the lead sponsor of the House Resolution. “Despite the accusations, he became a heavyweight legend who inspired and paved the way for future African American athletes. It has now been over 100 years since Jack Johnson won the heavyweight title, and it’s time we restore his reputation with a pardon that is long over-due.”

The White House has not indicated whether or not it will issue a pardon for Johnson. King and Rep. Jesse L. Jackson, JR. [D-IL] both noted that they had worked with the late Vernon Forrest in introducing the resolution.