

By: Alonzo

H.R. No. 3653

R E S O L U T I O N

1 WHEREAS, The triumphant story of Jack Johnson, the boxer from
2 Texas who became the first African American heavyweight champion of
3 the world, has long been marred by his unjust and racially motivated
4 felony conviction in 1913; and

5 WHEREAS, The son of two former slaves, Jack Johnson was born
6 in Galveston in 1878; at the age of 16, he moved to New York City,
7 where he eventually found work as a janitor in a boxing gym and
8 learned the sport by serving as a sparring partner; and

9 WHEREAS, Mr. Johnson returned to Galveston and won his first
10 professional fight on November 1, 1898, knocking out his opponent
11 in the second round, and by 1903, he had won at least 50 fights
12 against both black and white men; on February 3, 1903, he won the
13 World Colored Heavyweight Championship, and he held the title for
14 five years; and

15 WHEREAS, Because James J. Jeffries, the world heavyweight
16 champion, refused to enter the ring with a black fighter,
17 Mr. Johnson eventually had to leave the United States for a chance
18 at the title; for two years, he shadowed Canadian boxer Tommy Burns,
19 by then the reigning champion, around the world, taunting him in the
20 press; finally, on December 26, 1908, Mr. Johnson defeated Burns in
21 a bout in Sydney, Australia, becoming the first African American
22 heavyweight world champion; and

23 WHEREAS, Outraged by Mr. Johnson's triumph, many racist
24 commentators called for his defeat by a "Great White Hope," and

1 James Jeffries was coaxed out of retirement for what was billed as
2 the "Fight of the Century"; on July 4, 1910, in a ring that was built
3 especially for the match in Reno, Nevada, Jack Johnson decisively
4 and indisputably defeated Jeffries in front of 20,000 people, and
5 he held the title for more than six years, until April 1915; and

6 WHEREAS, Mr. Johnson's victory led to jubilation in the
7 African American community and resulted in riots by angry white
8 mobs; compounding the racial anger at Mr. Johnson's success were
9 his marriages to and romantic relationships with several white
10 women, at a time when black men were regularly lynched for being
11 "too familiar" with white women; and

12 WHEREAS, In 1910, the U.S. Congress passed the Mann Act, also
13 known as the "White Slave Traffic Act," which outlawed the
14 transportation of women in interstate or foreign commerce "for the
15 purpose of prostitution or debauchery," and on October 18, 1912,
16 Mr. Johnson was arrested for violating the law by virtue of his
17 relationship with a white woman, Lucille Clifton; and

18 WHEREAS, Even though Mr. Johnson and Ms. Clifton were
19 married on December 4, 1912, and despite the fact that the so-called
20 "offenses" with which he was charged took place before the passage
21 of the Mann Act, Mr. Johnson was convicted by an all-white jury in
22 June 1913; and

23 WHEREAS, Mr. Johnson and his wife fled the country and lived
24 in exile for seven years; when he finally returned on July 20, 1920,
25 he was arrested at the Mexican border by federal agents and sent to
26 Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas, where he was imprisoned until
27 July 9, 1921; and

1 WHEREAS, Later in life, Mr. Johnson fought in exhibition
2 matches, refereed fights, and managed and trained other boxers;
3 during World War II, he was active in the effort to encourage his
4 fellow citizens to buy war bonds; he died in an automobile accident
5 in 1946, and in 1954, he was inducted into the Boxing Hall of Fame;
6 and

7 WHEREAS, Jack Johnson's legacy continues; he was the subject
8 of a feature film, *The Great White Hope*, in which he was played by
9 James Earl Jones, and the noted filmmaker Ken Burns made a two-part
10 documentary about him, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of*
11 *Jack Johnson*; he has inspired music by such greats as Leadbelly,
12 Miles Davis, and Wynton Marsalis, and he has been honored with a
13 life-size bronze statue in a park named for him in his hometown of
14 Galveston; and

15 WHEREAS, An enormously gifted boxer, Jack Johnson helped pave
16 the way for other great African American athletes with his peerless
17 technique and indomitable spirit; unbowed and unintimidated by the
18 virulent racism of his time, he fought not only to defeat his
19 opponents in the ring, but for the right to love whomever he chose
20 and to live his life as a free man; now, therefore, be it

21 RESOLVED, That the House of Representatives of the 84th Texas
22 Legislature hereby recognize the life of Jack Johnson.