

# Analysis: Johnson needs posthumous pardon

By **STEVE WILSTEIN**  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Justice is long overdue for Jack Johnson.

The first Black heavy-weight champion, the Muhammad Ali of the early 20th century, deserves a posthumous presidential pardon for a racially motivated conviction that sent him to prison for a year.

When President Bush was governor of Texas, he proclaimed Johnson's birthday, March 31, as Jack Johnson Day for five straight years, 1996-00, to honor the Galveston native. Bush could amend a sorry chapter in American race relations by pardoning Johnson now.

There would be no more appropriate time to do it than on Martin Luther King Day, Jan. 17, when "Unforgivable Blackness," a Ken Burns documentary on Johnson airs on PBS.

The film, to be shown in two parts on consecutive nights, reveals Johnson as a complicated figure who embodied, as Burns said, "the African-American struggle to be truly free in this country — economically, socially and politically."

"He absolutely refused to play by the rules set by the White establishment or even those of the Black community," Burns said. "In that sense, he fought for freedom not just as a Black man, but as an individual."

That struggle aside, the film is fascinating for the glimpses we see of a genius inside the ropes. Archival footage shows a defensive fighter who danced around the ring gracefully, counterpunched with power and overwhelmed his opponents with furious combinations. He could end a fight quickly but had the stamina to last 20 or 30 rounds or more.

That revolutionary style influenced generations of boxers, most notably Ali, who studied films of Johnson.

Ali and Johnson were alike in their brash personalities and wit, their curiosity and intelligence. They were alike, too, in the courage they showed in difficult times — Ali when he joined the Black Muslims and opposed the Vietnam war; Johnson when he was banned from championship fights because of his race and was persecuted for very public relationships with White women.

Both men, though relatively unschooled, lived outsized lives, insisting on

being themselves. It was hard enough for Ali to do that, even at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. It was harder yet for Johnson in the decades that marked the low point for African-Americans after emancipation.

The writer Stanley Crouch, one of the commentators who make Burns' documentary so compelling, said there was always a threat of

somebody shooting Johnson. As affable and humorous as he was, Johnson had no shortage of enemies, Black or White.

W.E.B. Du Bois, the Black leader of Johnson's time who gives the film its title by understanding that Johnson's only problem was his "unforgivable Blackness," was still disturbed by Johnson's choice of profession and his marriages to White women.

The relatively conservative Booker T. Washington, who urged education as the salvation of African-Americans, hated Johnson as a loose cannon on the deck of racial politics in sensitive and dangerous times.

"It's less that Johnson's a Black leader than he is a leader," Burns said. "By refusing to assume the role of a 'credit to his race' or a civil rights leader, he stands as a

leader of a different kind." The actor James Earl Jones, who portrayed Johnson in the Broadway play and film "The Great White Hope," said in the documentary that Johnson "wouldn't let anybody define him. He was a self-defined man. And this issue of his being Black was not that relevant to him. But the issue of his being free ... was very relevant."

It's the failure of all biog-

ographies of Johnson, Burns acknowledged, to grasp how a kid from Galveston did what he did, swimming upstream against the tide of the universe and essentially getting away with it.

"Our film should be subtitled 'The Rise and Fall and Rise Again of Jack Johnson,'" Burns said. "He's just not going to be defeated. I think that's an incredibly admirable (See *Sportview*, Page 16)



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