City Council
Chief Clerk's Office
402 City Hall
Philadelphia, PA 19107

Legislation Text

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Commemorating the life of Temple professor and civil liberties champion John Raines, who participated in the Freedom Rides in the 1960s, bravely seized and leaked FBI files revealing government surveillance of civilians in 1971, and served as a tireless activist for peace and racial justice throughout his entire life.

WHEREAS, John Curtis Raines was born in 1933 in Minneapolis and earned his bachelor's degree from Carleton College in 1955 and his doctorate in Christian Social Ethics from the Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1967; and

WHEREAS, After serving as a minister in Setauket, New York, Raines felt a call to action and began participating in Freedom Rides across the South. In 1961, as he stood with an interracial group of activists in a bus station waiting room after the Supreme Court had ruled that interstate waiting rooms had to be desegregated, Raines was arrested in Little Rock, Arkansas and was found guilty of "threatening the breach of the peace." Raines noted that,"I found myself in a space I had never been before - outside power and regarded by power as an enemy, and power had the power to punish me for that"; and

WHEREAS, In addition to his work as a Freedom Rider, Raines courageously participated in racial justice efforts time and time again throughout the 1960s: he demonstrated with seminarians until a filibuster on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was broken, led Black voter registration efforts across the South, boycotted First National City Bank in its attempt to support the apartheid economy in South Africa, and worked as a Freedom School educator in Mississippi; and

WHEREAS, In Fall 1966, Raines came to Philadelphia with his wife Bonnie to teach religious studies and social ethics at Temple University, where he would remain for the next 50 years; and

WHEREAS, Once moving to Philadelphia, Raines became involved with the East Coast Conspiracy to Save Lives, an anti-war protest group led by Catholic priests who were committed to disrupting the Vietnam War draft. As the group eventually decided to look elsewhere for protest strategies after the burning of draft cards were met with especially long prison sentences, Raines was trained in covert burglary and file theft; and

WHEREAS, Using skills learned from his time with the East Coast Conspiracy to Save Lives, John and Bonnie Raines joined the underground Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI, a group committed to revealing the FBI's surveillance of anti-war and civil rights activists; and

WHEREAS, On March 8, 1971, as most, including local police and FBI security guards, were focused on a historic boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, a group including Bonnie Raines, who for months had disguised herself as a Swarthmore College student studying the FBI's plan to hire more women in order to catalogue classified FBI documents, broke into the FBI field office in Media, PA; and

WHEREAS, John Raines, who waited for two hours as his wife and her accomplices collected essential documents, helped transfer the files to a Quaker farmhouse in Pottstown, PA, where the group spent ten days meticulously examining and photocopying over 1,000 files that they collected from the FBI field office; and

WHEREAS, The group soon realized their efforts were not in vain, as they found memos instructing FBI agents to hold interviews with anti-Vietnam war protesters in order to flex their surveillance strength and to send their message that "there is an FBI agent behind every mailbox." Sixty percent of the files collected contained political information, clearly demonstrating that the FBI had been intensely monitoring peace and racial justice groups; and

WHEREAS, While the FBI questioned Raines and others involved in the fact finding mission, the group was never caught. The *Washington Post* published the files on March 25, 1971, opening the door for public and Congressional scrutiny of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI's willingness to spy on civilians, and facilitating new laws and regulations designed to further protect civilian privacy and protest power; and

WHEREAS, The work of John and Bonnie Raines and members of the Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI spurred the creation of the Senate's Church Committee, which was directed to investigate abuses by the government intelligence agencies. This Committee was the precursor to today's Senate Select Committee on Intelligence; and

WHEREAS, The bravery of John Raines, who continued teaching at Temple until he passed on November 12, 2017, is a reminder that mass surveillance is antithetical to democratic freedom, that dissent is a democratic ideal, and that, in Raines' words, "We the People must take the initiative to form [and protect] a more perfect Union"; and

WHEREAS, Throughout his life, Raines served as an integral part of Philadelphia's social and political fabric, and his activist spirit will reverberate throughout our City for years to come. Raines is survived by his wife, Bonnie; children Lindsley, Mark, Nathan, and Mary; and seven grandchildren; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, Commemorates the life of Temple professor and civil liberties champion John Raines, who participated in the Freedom Rides in the 1960s, bravely seized and leaked FBI files revealing government surveillance of civilians in 1971, and served as a tireless activist for peace and racial justice throughout his entire life.

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