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Whites v. blacks. (race relations; O.J. Simpson murder trial) (Special Report:
 The Verdict)
 Mark Whitaker

Were we watching the same trial? After the verdict, the two communities talked past each other, with passionate misunderstanding. By Mark Whitaker

IT WAS JUST AFTER 1 P.M. EAST COAST time last Tuesday, the moment when America stopped. At a small midtown Manhattan law firm, the managing partner had invited the entire office to the conference room to watch the O. J. Simpson verdict. Delaying lunches, holding calls, some 50 lawyers and 25 support staff gathered around the TV. About a dozen of them were blacks or other minorities, but it was the kind of place where people thought that skin color wasn't a big deal. One attorney had conducted an e-mail poll; 33 lawyers predicted "guilty," 11 "not guilty." But it was office-pool, spectator-sport stuff. Then the clerk began reading the verdict--". . . we the jury . . . find the defendant Orenthal James Simpson not guilty of the crime of murder . . . upon Nicole Brown Simpson, a human being . . ."--and the air of professional detachment evaporated. From the corner where the black lawyers and assistants had gathered came loud whoops and yells of approval. Throughout the rest of the room, there were gasps and mutterings of disgust. One of the firm's most respected young attorneys, a white woman, vented her rage. "This is a travesty," she said. "I feel like going out and murdering someone myself"

Across the country last week, the national soap opera that had been the O. J. Simpson trial suddenly turned into a racial Rorschach test. For the past 16 months, most Americans had consumed the proceedings as entertainment, from the 95 million people who watched the slow-motion Bronco chase to the weekly critiquing of Marcia Clark's hair, "Kato" Kaelin's surf-speak and Judge Lance Ito's erratic command of the courtroom. As Barry Scheck and Johnnie Cochran chipped away at the often hapless prosecution witnesses, and O.J. tried on the glove that didn't fit, it became accepted wisdom that Simpson would somehow walk, whether he committed the crime or not. Then came the powerful closing arguments, the jury's quick request for the limo driver's damning

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testimony and the stunning announcement that a verdict had been reached after less than four hours of deliberation. "It must be ,guilty'," millions of Americans, most of them white, believed.

When it wasn't, much of white America felt a surge of outrage--that justice had been mocked, that the jury had ignored overwhelming evidence, that a wife-beater many still believed guilty of a grisly double murder had been set free. "Do you know how to riot?" a white talent-agency executive called a friend in L.A. to ask. In offices and bars and around kitchen tables, the indignant gathered to commiserate in what some called the white community's Rodney King uprising. On talk radio and computer online services, the talk was even rawer. "I was considering Colin Powell for president," read a CompuServe posting from someone identified as Peter J. Doucette, "but I do not trust blacks new. They have proven that they are worse racists than any whites." On Rockingham Drive in Brentwood, as the newly freed Simpson partied inside with friends, a dozen protesters gathered in candlelight outside his home, chanting "Murderer, murderer]"

Yet while millions of whites fumed, much of black America celebrated. As the verdict was read, one network cut away to a group of black law students at Howard University screaming and dancing for joy. In black neighborhoods from Harlem to Simpson's boyhood home of Potrero Hill in San Francisco, motorists honked their horns and people came out in the streets to cheer and share the news. Watching this, many whites felt even more angry--and stunned. How could anyone cheer when two mutilated victims were still dead and their families were in such pain? Did this mean that for blacks racial solidarity trumped everything--hard evidence, reason, conscience? Watching the races watch each other, the Rev. Eugene Rivers, leader of a black church called the Azusa Christian Community in inner-city Boston, felt a profound sense of despair. "This is accelerating America's descent into a state of psychological apartheid," he lamented. "The level of polarization is amazing."

As it turned out, the fierce emotions on both sides had very little to do with what went on in the jury room. When the acquittal came back so swiftly, many commentators assumed that the largely black jury had engaged in what legal experts call "jury nullification"--ignoring the evidence to send a broader message, in this case to the police. But when the 10 women and two men who had sat through 126 witnesses and 133 days of testimony finally went home, they seemed far more exhausted than outspoken. Most withdrew from public sight, although there were reports some were holding out for big money to talk. Those few who did speak seemed mystified at all the fuss, and insistent that they had called the case based on the evidence as they saw it. The numerous police missteps and whatever they learned about Det. Mark Fuhrman's racism clearly led them to distrust the cops, testimony. But they also had commonsense questions about the rest of the evidence: Why wasn't there more blood? Why didn't the glove fit? How could Simpson have

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cleaned himself up in such a short period of time?

THAT SO MANY AMERICANS REFUSED to accept the jury's finding showed what TV in the courtroom had wrought: the 150 million people who watched the verdict all considered them selves jurors. And if you listened to them closely, it was clear that for both whites and blacks, the trial had long since ceased to be strictly a legal matter and had come to stand for larger, deeply felt causes. For many whites, the issue was domestic abuse. Only a small minority of bigots ever viewed Simpson as a symbol of black male violence. Until the murders' most whites saw him at best as the kind of star athlete and entertainer who "transcends race," at worst as a harmless pitchman. What changed that forever was the airing of the 911 tapeS--of O.J. ranting and beating down the back door of the Gretna Green condo, of Nicole pleading with the operator that "He's f---ing going nuts . . . He's going to beat the s--t out of me." That haunting voice, and the photos of Nicole's swollen and bruised face after beatings that evidently had gone on for years, convinced many whites, women in particular, that Simpson was perfectly capable of killing his ex-wife. From then on, the DNA findings and all the other prosecution evidence only hardened that sense of certainty.

FOR MANY AFRICAN-AMERICANS, meanwhile, the trial turned into a parable about the criminal-justice system. For them, the clincher was the Mark Fuhrman tapes, with their hateful boasting that "anything out of a nigger's mouth . . . is a f---ing lie"... and that ,if you did the things that they teach you in the academy, you'd never get a f---ing thing done." Those tapes confirmed what many African-Americans had always known or suspected--that many white cops hate black people, and see nothing wrong with violating civil rights or tampering with evidence to put away anyone they're convinced deserves it. The Fuhrman factor evoked a powerful story in the African-American experience: of the black man fighting a system that's rigged against him. So when blacks applauded the verdict, many were cheering less for the literal event than its allegorical significance--for a different ending to the story. As legal scholar Lani Guinier, Bill Clinton's ill-fated nominee to serve as assistant attorney general for civil rights put it, "The rejoicing is not that somebody got away with murder, but that somebody beat the system."

In fact, until this case, few African-Americans ever saw O. J. Simpson as a hero. "Most black people called him an Oreo, if not a Tom," says Joseph Lowery, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. After his acquittal, black newspapers called on Simpson to show more commitment to African-American issues, rather than retreating to his white suburb and country club. For many blacks, the real hero of the trial was Johnnie Cochran. As sociologist Elijah Anderson of the University of Pennsylvania points out, it was Cochran, with his skill at indicting the police but also his mastery of ethnic code words,

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clothing and symbols, who managed to turn O.J. into a "race man"--the kind of historical figure that African-Americans believe they must defend at all costs. And after years of watching shrewd, high-priced lawyers win freedom for rich white clients, from Claus von Bulow to William Kennedy Smith, many blacks relished the spectacle of a masterful black defense attorney winning one for a wealthy brother.

How profoundly will the sullen O.J. aftermath affect the already testy state of race relations? Last week the nation's political leaders did little to calm things down. President Clinton, who found time to watch the verdict off the Oval Office, issued an innocuous statement about needing to respect the verdict but sympathize with the victims, families. Except for conservatives Patrick Buchanan and Robert Dornan, who denounced the verdict, most of Clinton's GOP challengers tried to stay out of it, too. Even Colin Powell, whom many are calling on to run for president in part because he is seen as a potential racial healer, talked only mildly of the need to "work toward reconciliation." But it may be hard for the candidates to keep ducking the controversy next week, when hundreds of thousands of blacks will converge on Washington for the Million Man March organized by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. Fallout from the O.J. verdict is likely to be a theme, and Cochran and even Simpson himself are expected to attend.

In the short term, some experts expressed hope that the verdict would focus attention on bigotry and unequal treatment in the justice system. Attorney General Janet Reno said the Justice Department would investigate the LAPD for the kind of violations Fuhrman bragged about. Joe Hicks, an African-American community leader in Los Angeles was among many black and white commentators who called for a nationwide probe of police misconduct--and warned that inaction would result in making it harder to prosecute and convict criminals. But there was just as much evidence that disgust over the Simpson outcome might simply leave whites determined to make it more difficult for black juries to acquit black defendants. Prospects suddenly brightened for a California amendment that would allow "non-majority" verdicts of 10-2, as well as new proposals that would limit "peremptory challenges" that allow lawyers to exclude jurors on the basis of race. As N. Don Wycliff, the black editorial-page editor of the Chicago Tribune, put it: "White people are feeling now the same anger and frustration over the justice system that black people have felt for a long time. I fear the reaction will not be, 'Hey, now I see what the other guy has been saying all this time.' It'll be, 'Let's get back'."

More than a few whites were talking about getting back in other ways. Long before the O.J. trial, political and public support began to dry up for welfare, affirmative-action and other government programs that disproportionately benefit minorities. It's become increasingly fashionable to argue that the civil-rights movement was about giving blacks equal protection and opportunity as individuals--but that

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there's no reason society has to respond to demands for group preferences forever. NOW, the sight of what many whites viewed as African-Americans uncritically celebrating the acquittal of a guilty man simply because he is black is likely to deepen this impatience with "grievance politics" and "groupthink." Watching blacks portray Simpson as the victim of a racist system, one white writer from the Midwest, a longtime liberal, complained, "Why is the problem always the job or the schools or the police? Why is the problem never because ,one of us, did something wrong?"

Indeed, what was different--and disturbing--about the racial talk last week was that so many white liberals sounded fed up. Many middle-class professionals who have always supported integration, maintained office and social friendships with African-Americans and resisted the backlash against affirmative action were appalled by what black novelist Dennis Williams called the "end-zone dance" over the Simpson acquittal. It made them wonder aloud whether they really knew African-Americans as well as they thought they did, and whether the racial gap wasn't much wider than they had believed. "Many whites are extremely saddened by what they've seen," said Michael Dawson, a black political scientist at the University of Chicago who studies public opinion on racial issues. "The idea that many blacks across class lines could actually believe in a police conspiracy seems incredible to them. The notion that race can trump both class and gender also troubles them. They're mystified--how can a murderer possibly be a hero?"

Listening to this white anguish, some blacks merely shrugged that they've known for a long time that race relations are lousy. Others worried privately that the trial's bitter aftertaste would endanger the already embattled black political agenda. But still other African-American leaders saw an opportunity for a radical re-evaluation of what the priorities of the debate on race should be. The reaction to the Simpson verdict did indeed show that blacks and whites don't understand each other, they argued, and proved that Martin Luther King's vision of a harmonious, colorblind society is nowhere in sight. So rather than spend so much energy and money trying to promote integration, perhaps both blacks and whites should focus on strengthening imperiled institutions in the black community. For example, the Reverend Rivers argues that instead of spending \$40 million a year on busing, Boston should pour that money into predominantly black, inner-city schools. "Maybe it's time that the traditional liberal assumptions about race be completely rethought," he says. "What does equality mean?"

Such thinking has led some black intellectuals and inner-city leaders to revisit a proposition that for decades would have seemed heretical for African-Americans to suggest: that "separate but equal" may not be such a bad idea. Their argument is that whites may not want to live alongside blacks--and vice versa--but everyone has a social interest in

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seeing that black schools are better so they produce employable workers, that inner cities have jobs so their residents don't turn to crime and drugs, and that black neighborhoods get the same kind of "community policing" that whites are clamoring for, to help restore black faith in the justice system. In an unlikely intellectual convergence, black advocates of this new agenda agree with white conservatives that this effort must start with black self-help. Where they differ is in arguing that it will also require government money and a commitment on the part of middle-class whites to see their tax dollars go to schools and businesses outside their own neighborhoods. As the Reverend Rivers puts it, "If we're going to stay separate, the equal part has to be nonnegotiable."

Yet as the nation began life without the O.J. trial, far from all whites or African-Americans saw the racial impasse as hopeless. While the media focused on the celebrations, a NEWSWEEK Poll: found that a quarter of blacks surveyed thought that Simpson was guilty. And an even greater number regretted the in-you]-face rejoicing. "I cringed at those scenes of jubilation," said the Rev. Emanuel Cleaver, mayor of Kansas City, Mo., "not because I didn't know how black people felt, but because of the fear and misunderstanding it would generate." Meanwhile, NEWSWEEK's Poll found that a third of the whites agreed with the verdict, and half thought the jury had been fair and impartial. And among with the images of disagreement, the final chapter of the trial also brought moving personal scenes of racial understanding: Juditha Brown sharing tender moments with O. J. Simpson's mother outside the court room; black prosecutor Christopher Darden crying on the shoulders of Ron Goldman's sister and stepmother as they displayed not only their disappointment but the friendship they had formed.

PERHAPS ONLY IN America could a media circus as surreal as the Simpson trial become a vehicle for a national conversation about race. Yet as painful as it was, the fact that both whites and blacks felt so free to vent their frustrations represented a kind of progress in a nation where for so long both groups have been afraid to confront each other with their true feelings. It was also a uniquely American notion, after all, that we could shed the baggage of 300 years of slavery, segregation and legal discrimination in 30 years. To no historian's surprise, it hasn't quite worked out that way. But blacks can't help dealing with whites, if for no other reason than that they still hold most of the nation's political and economic power. And whites can hardly give up on the relationship either, if only because none of America's most pressing social issues--from education and crime to competitiveness, entitlements and the national debt--can be addressed without black participation. The emotions of last week may prove that "for better" is farther away than we thought. But if the races don't keep working at what divides them, it could easily be for worse.

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Chicago Tribune
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Wednesday, October 4, 1995

NEWS

THE SIMPSON VERDICT: The decision.

RACE TINTS SHARED EXPERIENCE REACTION TO VERDICT SPLIT INTO BLACK, WHITE
Peter Kendall ; Pamela Cytrynbaum, Tribune Staff Writers. Tribune staff writers
Joan Giangrasse Kates, Patricia Tennison, Byron P. White, Steve Mills, Tracy
Dell'Angelo, Stacey Singer, Andrew Martin, Nancy Ryan and Janan Hanna
contributed to this report.

As the not-guilty verdict came to the crowd transfixed on the television sets in the electronics department of Marshall Field's State Street store, about half the people let out a jubilant cheer.

The other half looked stunned.

Larry Williams, a 39-year-old African-American, shook his head as the scene played out around him.

"I hate to see this division," he said. "The white people are sitting there with their heads hanging down. Most of the people cheering are African-Americans. There's something wrong with that."

Across America, a phenomenon occurred Tuesday that is as difficult to face as it was impossible to ignore: Whether it appeared that justice was served or denied depended largely, though not exclusively, on the observers' race.

In those extraordinary minutes when people drained off the streets and out of office cubicles to hear the verdict in the O.J. Simpson trial, Americans appeared to be sharing a rare and intense moment of community.

Traffic stopped, commerce paused and lunchtime plans were delayed. At O'Hare International Airport, passengers refused to board noon flights until they had heard the verdict.

Even at the stately Chicago Club, the captains of industry and some British diplomats sat in comfortable club chairs to watch

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the TV bulletins.

It was a shared experience, but one that highlighted differences.

Many African-Americans, smoldering with the sense that the criminal justice system is stacked against members of their race, felt that, for once, justice had been done. The jury, they said, had been colorblind.

Many whites, so certain that racial issues play little role in the justice system, for the first time had to confront feelings that skin color undermined justice. That's an idea many blacks live with day in, day out.

At O'Hare, Al Tone, 47, a white businessman returning home to Cranberry, N.J., pointed at a television screen in a bar.

"You could say this is like the Rodney King case in reverse," Tone said. "I think the selection of the jury decided the case long before it was heard."

Many blacks, however, rejected the argument that racial sentiment determined the outcome.

"They didn't have enough evidence," said Chardon Jenkins, a 25-year-old hair stylist on the West Side.

Public opinion polls had already shown that belief in Simpson's guilt or innocence was split along racial lines—a majority of African-Americans thought he was not guilty; most whites thought he was.

But when the verdict was read Tuesday, the differences in the reactions of blacks and whites was still stunning.

Even gender and other factors that might be expected to supercede race in a trial that focused on domestic abuse seemed to take a back seat.

As the clock ticked toward noon Tuesday, the four women gazing at the television set in the living room of a North Side battered women's shelter were unified by one thing: They were there because they'd been abused.

But they, too, were divided.

Two of the women were African-American—they cheered when the

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verdict was read.

Two were not-they shook their heads, disappointment pulling at their faces.

With different scripts in different locations, the same scene played out across the city and its suburbs.

In Schaumburg, a mostly white crowd gathered in front of 69 television screens inside the Alumni Club restaurant, 871 E. Algonquin Rd., let out a collective gasp when the verdict was read.

Just one man, a Cellular One employee-and one of the few blacks in the restaurant-shouted. "Wow!" he called out, raising his arms in the air. "Wow, wow, wow!"

At the next table, a group of white workers from Motorola had expected a verdict of innocent, although most of them considered Simpson guilty.

"It's gotten down to a race trial, and there are nine blacks on the jury," said Clyde Passman.

At Kennedy-King College on the South Side, some 200 African-American students gathered around the television set, shoulder to shoulder.

When the verdict was read, a deafening cheer filled the room. Many students hugged each other. One flashed the lights on and off.

Gene Bells, a 21-year-old communications major from Hyde Park, said the verdict boosted his faith in the criminal justice system.

"There's the question of racism in the world and whether the justice system works for African-Americans," Bells said. "This was proof to everyone that the system is fair. It's a good day for justice. Period.

"This is proof that justice is not necessarily geared towards a specific ethnic group."

Sipping a beer at Pat Haran's on State Street, William Van Zanen saw something different.

"I thought maybe racism would be overcome in this case," said Van Zanen, 66, a retired Labor Department investigator. "But I was wrong."

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Randy Holcomb, a black, 35-year-old officer in Public Housing South, in the Robert Taylor Homes, said the verdict spoke to the pervasive role of race in the legal system.

"If somebody is on trial in this country, we don't look at right or wrong," Holcomb said. "We look at the color of their skin."

Carol Knapp, 55, of Forrest, in southern Illinois, wept for the victims' families as she watched while waiting for a plane at O'Hare.

"It should not have been racial-it's murder," Knapp said, clutching her fist to her chest. "My heart is so heavy. I cannot believe the prosecution conceded seating nine out of 12 black jurors."

The rift in opinion shouldn't surprise anyone.

"This is another example of when many blacks and many whites literally see a different social world," said Michael Dawson, a University of Chicago professor who has studied the political views of African-Americans.

"This is not a new chapter but continues the trend of racial polarization that's been becoming more swift over several years."

"It definitely says something about race. Neither side understands the other to some extent," said Philip Nyden, a sociology professor at Loyola University Chicago. "It says, 'It ain't over yet. We've got a long way to go.' "

Whites may not understand how blacks see the verdict because they have lived different lives, Nyden said. Nor have they gotten close enough to blacks to gain a better understanding.

"Someone who hasn't experienced discrimination isn't always sensitive to it," he said. "You can say you understand it, but you don't. . . . I think there are a lot of whites who just don't understand."

At his South Suburban Barber & Curl Design in Country Club Hills, R.J. Nix said there is nothing unbelievable about the defense theory that police planted evidence.

Five black men who were intently watching the television at the shop talked about how many times they were stopped by white police officers demanding to know who they were and where they were

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going.

"This is nothing new to black America," said Nix, whose booming voice fills the shop. "But it's new to white America."

As Lester Taylor, a 46-year-old private investigator who was at Nix's, sees it, the trial educated the nation.

"Racism, prosecutorial misconduct, bad police work--all these things are going to be challenged now. They have set a new standard," he said. "Now you've got the whole nation knowing about the law."

"The whole world has seen the rampant racism we already knew."

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PHOTOS 2;

Caption: PHOTO (color): Ken Bermingham, Jordan Webster and a waitress hear the verdict at a South Side grill. Tribune photo by Charles Osgood.

PHOTO (color): Barber Kenneth Watkins (left) and owner Jenice Sanders (right) let out a spontaneous cheer Tuesday when they hear the Simpson verdict on the television at Macks' Just Hair Salon, 752 W. 69th St. Tribune photo by Milbert Orlando Brown.

----- INDEX REFERENCES -----

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White and blue. (white reaction to black reaction to acquittal of O.J. Simpson;
Special Report: The Impact)
Jonathan Alter

I FELT WHITER LAST WEEK THAN I HAVE EVER FELT BEFORE, and I didn't like it. Sometimes feeling self-consciously white can be uncomfortable but illuminating; for instance, I understand the value of those times when I've been the only white person in a room or neighborhood. But this bone-whiteness was deeper, and tinged with an anger and widely shared purple resentment. In my case, the resentment didn't boil over into the racism now found on the Internet and talk radio. It didn't prevent me from sympathizing with a similar sense of injustice that blacks have historically felt. Yet I was plenty upset and the same, especially at the jubilation that many blacks (by no means all, it's important to note) expressed after O.J. walked. And I don't buy the argument that it's socially useful to learn just how divided we are on race. I wish we'd left this scab unpicked.

Yes, Fuhrman is vermin, and the prosecution should never have tried to prop him up. Proving that the lead detective is a liar would be fatal to many other criminal cases, even ones without racial issues. And obviously it would be good if the fallout from the case forced law enforcement to be less sloppy and arrogant.

So why the white rage? The flash point was less the non-guilty verdict itself than the continued insistence that the man is genuinely innocent. When you repeat a lie long enough and loud enough it lives. To have framed Simpson, the level of conspiracy required by detectives other than Mark Fuhrman is virtually impossible logistically, no matter how racist the LAPD might be. If believing a conspiracy is unreasonable and ignoring voluminous unrefuted blood and motive evidence is unreasonable, then doubt itself is unreasonable.

Jurors now insist they were not sending a message. Fine. But anyone who closely followed the trial would have to acknowledge that the jury seemed in deep denial about many prosecution arguments. To every point raised by juror No. 8 on "Nightline," for instance, the prosecution had

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a convincing response, which apparently didn't get aired in the jury room. Unless they're lying, the jurors talked about the case with each other for a far shorter time than 100 million other Americans talked about it with each other. Whatever the verdict, the victims and their families deserved better than that. Real killer. As for other possible killers, the suspects were inadvertently narrowed in a little-noticed comment by Robert Shapiro on "Larry King Live" last week. Shapiro casually said Ron Goldman was an "innocent bystander." That takes care of most of the defense's theories about drug conspiracies and the like. We now know the real killer is someone else with a major grudge against Nicole Brown specifically. Go get'em, O.J.

Of course such specifics don't really explain the strength of emotion among many whites who consider themselves to be enlightened on matters of race. Perhaps the is that we assumed, unthinkingly, that we occupied some kind of demilitarized zone with moderate blacks. If it wasn't color-blind, it was at least color-farsighted with certain common values allowed to share the foreground. Suddenly that zone was gone, at least as far as O.J. was concerned. Black moderates are familiar with the pressure to fall in line with a "black" position. They feel it again in this case. But for many white moderates, it's jarring to find ourselves identifying not with a set of racially idealistic principles but with the so-called "white" position. We expected more blacks to look beyond race to facts, as thousands of whites had during the Rodney King trial. When so many blacks didn't, it shocked us--and hardened us in ways that shocked us even more.

Here's the intentionally provocative message that Ben Stein, an L.A. writer, e-mailed Frank Rich of The New York Times last week: "When O.J. gets off, the whites will riot the way we whites do: leave the cities, go to Idaho or Oregon or Arizona, vote for Gingrich ... and punish the blacks by closing their day-care programs and cutting off their Medicaid." Stein might have added that more than a few overwrought whites could end up deciding that they weren't so keen on Colin Powell for president after all. And Powell's failure to show leadership last week by criticizing the rejoicing didn't help bridge the gap.

Even if predictions of post-simpson backlash are grossly overblown and let's hope they are) the basic white frustration remains: that race trumps spousal abuse, factual consistency and just about anything else. As early as the first polls, the Simpson case was perceived as racial--and perception became reality. But the truer subtext was always about money and celebrity and the sale of "reasonable doubt" to any defendant who can afford to plant it. If the same case had been brought against a defendant who wasn't rich and famous, it wouldn't matter whether he -or the jury -was black or white. He'd be on death row. That should be more than a TV truism about this case; it should stimulate thinking about how to take big money out of the courtroom. (One idea: limit compensation for expert witnesses to what government experts

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receive, which would allow poorer defendants to afford them.

It's just as bad for whites who didn't follow the case to assume Simpson's guilty as it is for blacks to assume he's innocent. But for blacks who did review the tremendous evidence, cheering was repugnant. Harlon L. Dalton, a black Yale law professor and the author of a perceptive new book called "Racial Healing," says that some black friends of his have admitted that they think Simpson did it, but can't say it publicly for fear of being seen as traitors to their race. That may be the saddest news of the week.

The Simpson case did not create all of these racial tensions, but the structure of today's "Crossfire" culture has worsened them. Over time, the adversary principle at the heart of the legal system -- opponents fight and justice emerges -- has been adopted by the media and the outside world. Now we have a full-blown adversary culture, where the clash of ideas is aimed mostly at producing entertainment. It's not just that arguing yields more heat than light, it's that the heat obliterates the light -- at least on race. Maybe no real healing is possible on this one -- maybe blacks and whites need to talk to each other more, but not about O. J. Simpson. So let's give it a rest, at long last, and work hard to find some other terrain on which to reacquaint ourselves.

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