

POINT OF VIEW

Our View

Woodward undeserving of celebrity treatment

Americans parallel justice to other praiseworthy attributes like cleanliness and godliness. Thus, it is befuddling that so many Americans shelved justice, and scientific evidence, and exercised myopic vision concerning the case of convicted murderer Louise Woodward.

Champagne flowed, hugs exchanged and high-fives were meted outside a Cambridge, Mass., courthouse after Judge Hiller Zobel set the 19-year-old British au pair (nanny) free on Tuesday, reducing from murder to manslaughter the charge against her and deeming her 279 days in jail sufficient punishment for being convicted in February of murdering 8-month-old Matthew Eappen.

Before Zobel's ruling, Woodward supporters jammed in front of the courthouse daily. Armed with signs urging Zobel to free Woodward, who came from Britain to care for Matthew and his 2-year-old brother Brendon, her backers provided valuable fodder for her defense.

Pro-Woodward pictures flooded television stations and earned front-page coverage in some of the nation's dailies. "Doctors" came on radio and television talk shows reaming the prosecution for not fully understanding the evidence. Internet chatters touted her innocence.

The Boston Globe, The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times even praised the judge's decision. And British papers and tabloids hailed Zobel's decision a "compassion conclusion" or touted his "mercy."

Is Woodward a superstar athlete or convicted criminal?

According to Zobel, she was the former.

"After extensive, cool, calm reflection, I am morally certain that allowing this defendant on this evidence to remain convicted on second-degree murder charges would be a miscarriage of justice," stated Zobel.

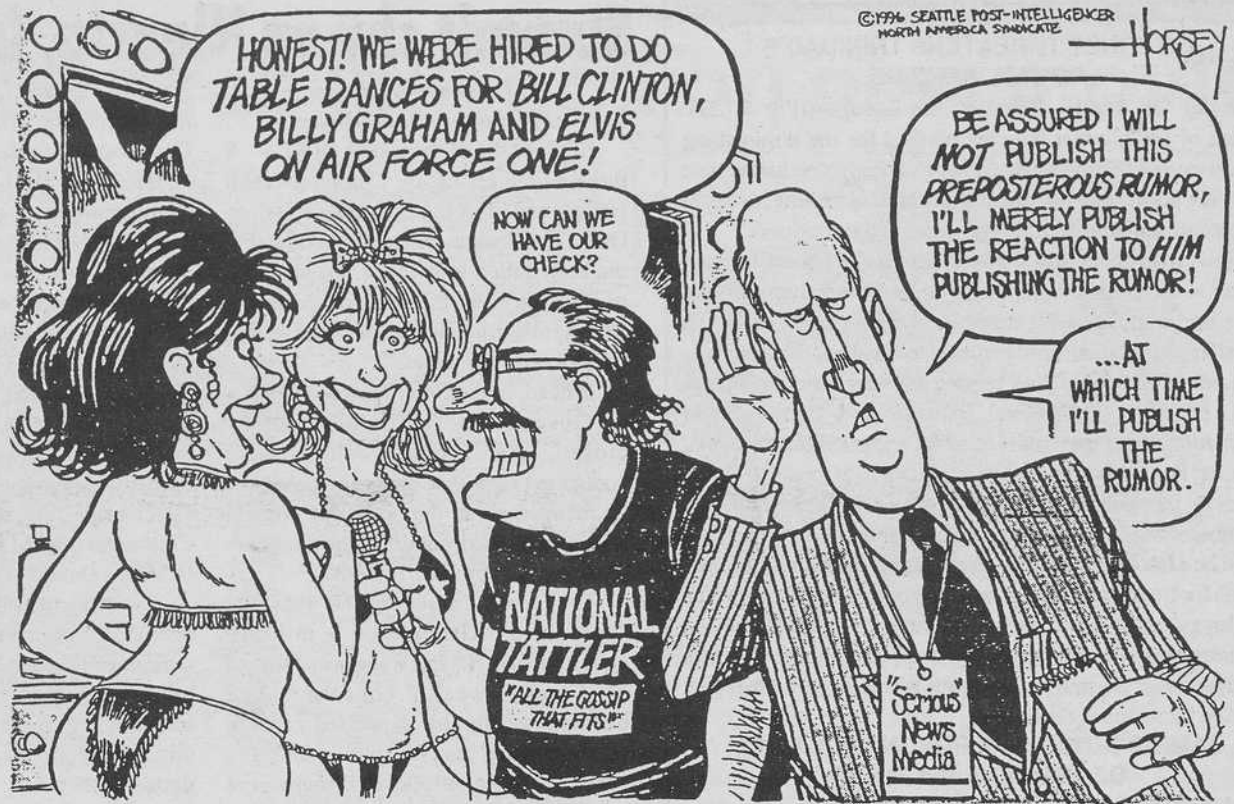
The greatest injustice in this case is the loss of life. A child died.

Matthew Eappen will never enjoy his first Christmas, his first birthday, his first bicycle, his first love. His parents, Sunil and Deborah Eappen, will never see him learn to walk or utter his first word or help him with his homework or see him grow. And Woodward's cursory remorse, she said she is "deeply saddened" by the loss, will not change that.

But Zobel had the power to make sure she paid for her crime as well as the responsibility of weighing all the evidence.

Doctors nationwide have shredded the defense's theory that Matthew died because an old head injury re-bleed. In a Nov. 22 USA Today editorial, 50 doctors from the United States, Canada and Australia sided with the prosecution and reamed the defense theory as "inaccurate, contrary to clinical experience and unsupported by any published literature."

Others feel Zobel's decision makes a mockery of the justice system. Many feel his decision made a mockery of a child's life; Matthews.



THE HAIR-SPLITTER

Their own worst enemy

Special to Sentinel-Voice

America's public schools, especially those in the cities, face a crisis. Public support for the schools is eroding sharply as stories of mismanagement and the poor performance of students continue to fill the print and electronic news media.

Yes, some of this is due to incomplete reporting. Yes, the success of many public schools in producing capable students is ignored. But it is also true that sometimes public school officials — be they in the superintendent's office, or on the school board, or at the local school level — show that they're the public schools' own worst enemy.

That was underscored for me by the difficulty a colleague encountered this fall in trying to help her son, who was entering the tenth grade, do well in an urban public high school of nearly 3,000 students. We'll call her son Joey. In her words:

"Joey was having problems. His grades had fallen badly from what they'd been in a private elementary school and I wanted to see what I could do to help him. It seemed he was just wasting his time.

I went to [the school] to see the guidance counselor, who informed me that Joey was a liar because he had said he was going to do better than he had done the last term, but that he was still doing the same bad things. He said that he couldn't believe anything my son said.

This year, the school gave Joey a special program that was supposed to help him get on track. The class met during the first periods of school.

I went to see what this class

To Be Equal

By Hugh B. Price
President
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was all about, and when I looked in through the back door of the class, I saw the teacher with his head down in a book reading, I saw four children with their heads down on their desks asleep, and I saw some boys rapping to girls in the corners. There was no interaction between students and the teacher at all. And my son wasn't there. So I walked in and asked the teacher if Joey was there. He said he didn't know, but I was welcome to look for him. Can you imagine? He didn't even know who my son was!

I went back to the guidance counselor and asked him what he thought of my putting Joey in private school. He more or less said it would be a waste of my money because Joey didn't want to do anything.

While we were talking, I realized there were students just hanging out near his office. They were boisterous and using profanity, but the guidance counselor didn't pay any attention to it. I was pretty annoyed because, first of all, those students should have been in class, and secondly, they shouldn't have been using profanity inside the school. And the guidance counselor kept interrupting our conversation to take phone

calls and even talk with some students. I felt he was showing a lack of respect for me as well as my son.

I went to [a nearby Catholic high school]. The area around the school was clean, quiet. I didn't see any kids hanging around outside or in the halls during school hours. A student politely showed me to the office. The principal welcomed me and we had a very direct talk.

I brought Joey there, to talk with the principal alone and to be tested. Before I left, the principal told Joey that the school was going to be much harder than public school, that it was going to cost me money, so he had to be sure he wanted to come there.

The principal called me later and said that Joey had been very candid in saying that he hadn't been pushed by the teachers in [the public school], that no one seemed to care, so he didn't care either. The principal said he felt Joey was ready to work hard and that they looked forward to having him.

So, I'm glad I took this initiative. [The private school's tuition] is steep for us. But his father and I are going to find a way to do it. I guess you get what you pay for with private schools, and with public schools, what you pay for, you don't get."

This parent's experience, along with the increasingly powerful voices seeking, under a variety of measures, to in effect, de-fund public education in America, should alarm those officials, who think public school systems still have a completely captive audience in urban black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

If they look around them, they'll find that more and more of those parents are looking at private schools. And being welcomed.

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