

C O M M E N T A R Y

Cochran made living defending 'No-Js'

By George E. Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Before he died of an inoperable brain tumor, Johnnie Cochran acknowledged that he would be forever known as the head of the "Dream Team" of lawyers that got O.J. Simpson acquitted of the charges in the murder of his former wife, Nicole, and her friend Ronald Goldman. But Cochran's career can be more accurately defined as representing what he called "No-Js" — common, everyday people who found themselves victimized by the criminal justice system.

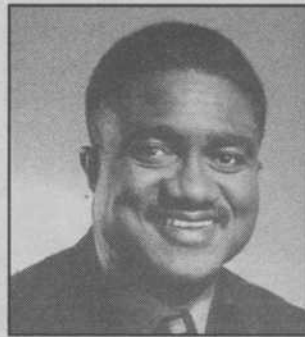
Sure, Cochran was at times a lawyer to the stars: Michael Jackson; actors Jim Brown and Todd Bridges; Snoop Dogg; Tupac Shakur; P. Diddy and O.J. In fact, he said having wealthy clients allowed him to take on cases of No-Js who otherwise would be unable to afford his services. He was more than the now-famous sound bite: "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit." Cochran was a prosecutor before he became a defense attorney. And in his very first case representing defendants, he filed a wrongful death suit for the widow of Leonard Deadwyler, a Black motorist who was shot to death by Los Angeles police as he rushed his pregnant wife to the hospital. Cochran lost that case but

went on to win a string of victories involving police brutality.

The most vexing case of Cochran's career involved former Black Panther Party member Elmer Geronimo Pratt. In 1968, Kenneth and Caroline Olsen were waiting for friends in Santa Monica, Calif. to join them in a game of tennis when they were accosted by two men described as Black and in their 20s. The White couple was forced to lay face-down as the gunmen opened fire on them. The husband survived, but the wife didn't. Kenneth Olsen, two years later, would identify Pratt as one of two men who shot him and his wife.

Julius Butler, a Black undercover FBI and local police department informant, would later testify that Pratt had confessed to killing the Olsens. At the time of the trial, however, Cochran did not know Butler was a paid informant. Without that knowledge, which was later disclosed in Freedom of Information documents, Butler was perceived as a credible and untainted witness.

Pratt was found guilty even though the FBI



GEORGE CURRY

had Black Panther wiretaps proving that Pratt was in Oakland at the time of the shooting incident in Southern California. Pratt would serve 27 years before his innocence was firmly established. Cochran said the release of Pratt on murder charges marked "the happiest day of my life practicing law." There are other markers that give us

better insight into Cochran. When Al Sharpton was fined for defaming a cop in the Tawana Brawley case, Cochran quietly helped pay his fine. He also took up the case of Reginald Denny, the White trucker who was pummeled in the middle of urban rebellion in Los Angeles. Cochran, an opponent of capital punishment, demonstrated courage and deep sincerity when he requested that a suspect not be given the death penalty for the murder of Cochran's younger brother.

Cochran's book, "Journey to Justice," written with Tim Rutten, explains his passion for the legal system.

"When I walk into a courtroom, I'm not merely defending the individual who stands accused," he wrote. "I'm defending a legal

system that guarantees the presumption of innocence and every individual's right to equal protection under the law. The only way that you or I can be assured of our right to a fair trial is if every citizen in the land is assured of his/her right to a fair trial. When one of us is denied justice, all of us are denied justice."

I remember chatting with Cochran at a party following an *Essence* magazine awards program in New York. Jamie Foxx along with P. Diddy and other celebrities were also in attendance at the after-party. As I watched Cochran work the room, I noticed that he didn't spend any more time with the stars than with lesser-known people waiting to get an autograph or a photograph or trying to recruit him for a case. He had the unique ability to make each person he spoke with feel they were the most important person in the room.

Johnnie L. Cochran Jr.'s middle initial did not stand for anything. But the name Johnnie Cochran will forever stand for the very best in our legal system. And Cochran was at his best when he was advocating on behalf of the No-Js, not the OJs.

George E. Curry is editor of *NNPA News Service* and *BlackPressUSA.com*.

Million Man March should be million-dollar event

By James Clingman
Special to Sentinel-Voice

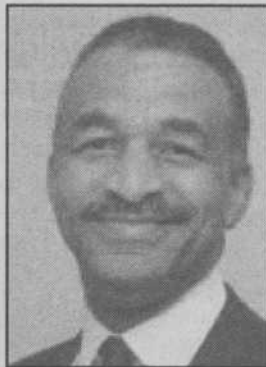
As we prepare, once again, to participate in another Million Man March and continue to seek reparations from the U.S. government, let's consider this thought: We can start marching right now, six months prior to the "gathering" of a million or more men. We can start this march in April 2005, make a brief stop to celebrate our victory in October 2005, and then continue marching for the rest of our lives toward economic freedom and self-reliance. In addition, we can obtain a portion of our reparations by paying ourselves, internally, with money we give to those we are petitioning.

First of all, the Million Man March must be financed. Ten years ago, around February 1995, my weekly column discussed the financial advantage one million Black men could take if we made a commitment to pool our money in response to that march. Not

only to pay the expenses of the march but also continuing after the march, in our various cities, adding more money on a regular basis that could be used as an investment and/or lending fund to finance our own events, our own businesses, and our own economic initiatives.

So once again, I call for us to make an economic statement prior to the next Million Man March.

We must commit to spend more of our \$700 billion+ annual income with our own businesses. We must commit to starting more businesses and growing those businesses by merging and forming alliances with one another and, of course, by patronizing those businesses. Our Million Man (and woman) March must start right now, not in October.



JAMES CLINGMAN

What sense does it make to revisit the most fantastic event in recent history, and do the same thing we did a decade ago? That would be akin to what we do in commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr. every January. We are heavy on commemorations, but when it comes to internal reparations we have proven to be lightweights.

We must change that. We cannot keep doing the same things and expect to get different results. If we do not use the Million Man March, 10 years later, to do what we should have done 10 years ago, we will miss a great opportunity to economically empower ourselves and build an economic foundation for our children. I don't know about you, but I am not interested in repeating the mistakes of the past. If we have not learned something about

how to improve our economic lot over the past ten years, we may as well stay at home this time.

So, our second Million Man March must start right now. We must start marching to our Black businesses and redirecting a greater amount of our vaunted "spending power" toward ourselves. Our dear Brother, Ken Bridges, who died on his way to freedom for our people, spoke at the Million Family March. He said then, as he said after the 1995 March, that while the event was the greatest he had ever attended an event in and of itself will not change our condition; we must have a movement. Ken called for Black people to pay ourselves "Internal Reparations" by spending more for Black manufactured goods and services. Things have not changed, and the next "event" alone will not change things. We must have an economic movement — prior to and after the event.

(See Clingman, Page 12)

LaGrande

(Continued from Page 9)

Florida assistant law professor, and Steven Graves, an assistant professor of geography at California State University, reveal that payday lenders are clustering around military bases.

This speaks to the integrity of the people running these centers. It's horrible enough to see the clients walk through my office doors who are in bondage because they have all of these payday loans and have gotten into financial trouble because someone loaned them money at more than 400 percent interest. But it's even worse when that borrower is a person who is fighting to protect our freedom — someone whose career can be ruined by this sort of loan.

Payday loans are very high interest loans intended to tide the borrower over to his next paycheck, usually two weeks. But what hap-

pens is that because the borrower is in financial trouble to begin with, few borrowers can pay the loan off when it comes due. Over 90 percent of all payday loans are made to borrowers caught in a cycle of repeat borrowing with five or more payday loans per year. Borrowers, on average, receive eight to 13 payday loans per year from a single payday loan shop.

Typically, these are so-called loan flips — rollover extensions or back-to-back loans — where the borrower is basically paying a fee, but neither for new money nor paying down the principal owed.

What makes the situation even worse is that the typical borrowers often borrow from more than one shop (1.7 shops on average per month), therefore, taking out 14 to 22 loans per year. Only 1 percent of all payday loans go to one-time emergency borrowers

who pay their loan within two weeks and don't borrow again within a year.

Payday lenders advertise that they provide access to credit. This is the furthest thing, I have ever heard of, from the truth. Actually, they provide access to debt. For people living paycheck to paycheck, a 400 percent payday loan is not the answer.

Charges for payday loans vary, but a typical lender will charge roughly \$17 to \$18 for a two-week loan of \$100. That's equivalent to an annual interest rate of 450 percent.

There are more myths than truths about payday loans, and I could speak to all of them, but space limitations prohibit me from doing so.

I will continue this article next week focusing on the predatory lending practices hidden in overdraft protection loans, credit cards and home buying and homeownership.

Predatory lending is not new. During biblical times, abusive lending practices were addressed by instituting standards even more strict than those commonly promoted by responsible lending advocates today. Throughout the Bible, abusive lending is associated with evil and corruption, while responsible lending is associated with virtue.

Recognizing the predatory nature of charging excessively for a loan — particularly when exploiting the weak and vulnerable — Biblical tradition bans both charging interest to the poor and foreclosing on property mortgaged under abusive loan terms. (Exodus 22:24-27, Nehemiah 5:3-11). Lenders beware, "he who increases his wealth by excessive interest gathers it for one who has pity on the poor." (Proverbs 28:8)