

## OUR VIEW

# Jackson's Life Made a Circus

It's hard to know where to start when discussing Michael Jackson's trial on child molestation charges. Perhaps the title of a recent editorial by noted Black columnist Earl Ofari Hutchinson says it best, "Feasting on Jackson." The media-promulgated feeding frenzy around the ex-king of pop's legal woes have made a mockery of the criminal justice system in ways that other celebrity trials and "trials of the century" could only hope. Thanks—or, more correctly, no thanks—to the omnipresence of media and society's seemingly pathological need for celebrity voyeurism, we know about everything about anything that occurs in the trial as it soon it does. One thing's certain: Jackson is bringing out the worst in people.

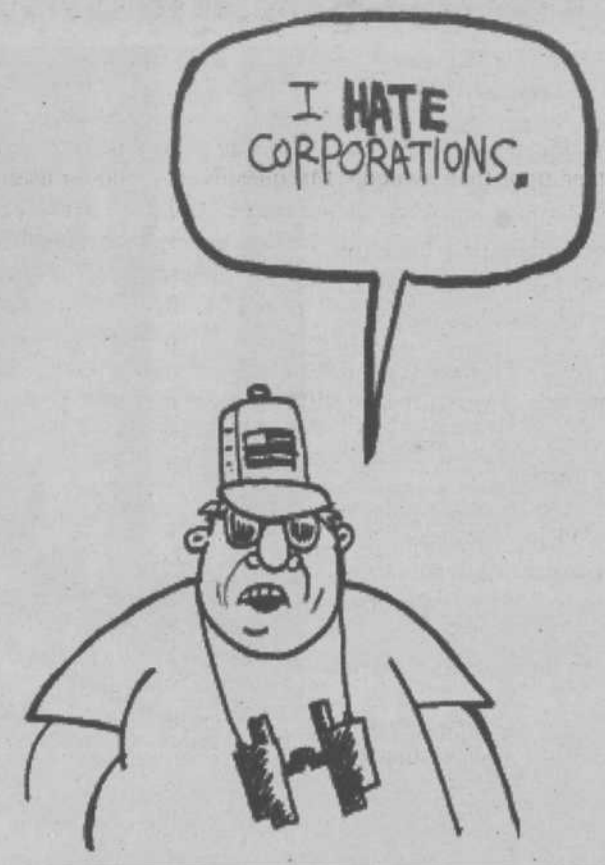
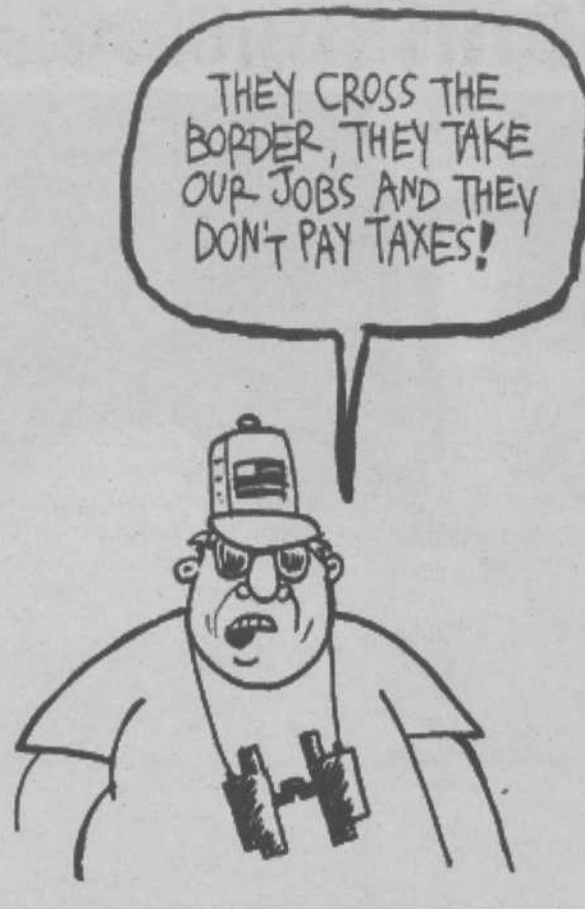
Speaking of people, has there ever been a more curious mix of humanity than the folks whose lives have intersected at this crossroads? There's Debbie Rowe, Jackson's ex-wife and mother of his two sons, who told the jury that Jackson asked her to shoot a video rebutting damaging claims aired on "Living with Michael Jackson," a television documentary about his life. There's psychologist Stan Katz, the confidante of the accuser, promoting his book, "The Codependency Conspiracy," during his testimony. There's videographer Hamid Moslehi, saying in testimony about recording the rebuttal video, that the accuser, his brother, sister and mother were at his house before the taping began and he didn't see anyone rehearse a script—the accuser's mother claims she filmed the rebuttal after being threatened. Moslehi also claims the mother never told him about receiving any death threats, about Jackson giving her children alcohol or about him improperly touching her son.

Wait. There's more. There's prosecution witness and travel agent Cynthia Montgomery testifying that Jackson associate Marc Schaffel arranged to send the accuser and his family on a one-way trip to Brazil in March 2003, a month after the child molestation allegations arose. She says Schaffel cancelled the trip at the last minute, saying "his plans had changed." If Montgomery's name doesn't ring a bell, it should—she's the same Cynthia Montgomery embroiled in the controversy over secretly taping Jackson and his former attorney Mark Geragos on a charter flight Jackson took to Santa Barbara to surrender on the charges. She and Jackson are suing each other.

There are also ex-Jackson employees Kassim Abdoal and Ralph Chacon, losers of wrongful termination lawsuits against their former boss; Chacon claims that he saw Jackson sexually abuse a child in 1992 or 1993 (the claims couldn't have come at a worse time for Jackson). There's former Jackson security guard Chris Carter, who was recently arrested on robbery charges in Las Vegas (so far, he's declined to testify).

Then there's Jackson himself who, even if proven innocent, hasn't helped his cause by continually dehumanizing himself—a ranch called Neverland; treating animals as equals; wearing masks to filter out airborne impurities—and blurring the line between fantasy and reality, between healthy interactions with children and relationships that test the boundaries of morals. Not to be absolved of any responsibility in creating this debacle are the parents who allowed Jackson to baby-sit. Leaving your children with people you don't know or trust—regardless of whether they're known the world over—is the height of irresponsibility. If there's one lesson to be learned from the heart-rending saga of child sexual abuse that's rocked the Catholic Church, it's that the most trustworthy people can do the most evil.

Once word got out of the child molestation allegations against Jackson, the whole scenario ceased being about the people involved—Jackson and his accuser—and took on an aura of spectacle; it became less about letting the criminal justice system work out than trying Jackson in the court of public opinion; the real issues became a side-show to what's becoming the worst show on earth.



## New bankruptcy law disruptive

By Dora LaGrande  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

On April 20, President Bush signed into law the 501-page Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act, which is going to make it harder for individuals to clear debts through bankruptcy.

The political maneuvering that was carried out by the credit card companies, auto dealers and major retailers for the past eight years to get this bill passed finally paid off. Opponents of the legislation believe that it is the policies and aggressive sales and liberal credit practices of these same companies—credit card, banking, automobile, major retail chains and department stores—that have caused many Americans to be in debt over their heads in the first place.

Now, yes, most people are saying, when you have an irresponsible deadbeat who's buying a plasma TV that he can't afford and is now filing for bankruptcy, then, no, he shouldn't be allowed to. In truth, this deadbeat is the exception, not the rule. The most comprehensive bankruptcy study ever undertaken was conducted at Harvard University and reveals that nearly 95 percent of those who declare personal bankruptcy are swamped by job loss, family breakup, medical problems or some combination. For over half, it's the health care costs that do them in; and for roughly 10 percent, they have the pleasure of getting a catastrophic



### ON THE RECORD

By Dora LaGrande

illness and going bankrupt at the same time.

In 2004, there was one personal bankruptcy filed every 19 seconds, and according to the U.S. Courts Administrative Office's Bankruptcy Statistics, more than 1.6 million households filed personal bankruptcy. For minorities, the statistics are even worse. African-Americans and Hispanics are much more likely to go bankrupt. Hispanic homeowners are nearly three times more likely than White homeowners to file for bankruptcy, and Black homeowners are nearly six times more likely than White homeowners.

While everyone agrees that some change was necessary, this bill, like so many others moving through Congress, comforts the comfortable and afflicts the afflicted. What's most tragic about the bill is that it makes no distinction between someone who gets unlucky in Las Vegas and those who get cancer. Not only does the bill favor wealthy creditors over those who are low-income workers, minorities, single mothers, middle-class families suffering financial and medical problems, or elderly, but it also removes the safety net for people who have lost

their jobs or who have insurmountable medical bills.

So, what are the differences in the old bill compared to the new bill?

Currently, in a Chapter 7 bankruptcy, the debtor's property—except for anything of a specified type that is excluded, allowing it to be kept by the debtor—is turned over to a trustee to sell and the sale proceeds used to pay creditors. In exchange, most types of debts are canceled. In many cases, most of the debtor's property falls into one or more of the excluded categories, and the practical effect is that the debts are simply wiped out.

In Chapter 13 bankruptcy, the property is retained by the debtor who works out a schedule to pay some portion of the debt, which no longer

accrues additional penalties or interest, over three to five years. Debtors who have property that would not be excluded under Chapter 7—and they wish to keep it—often use Chapter 13. It can also give a debtor who is behind on a mortgage or any other secured debt a chance to bring the payments current and keep the property that would otherwise be seized by creditors.

The new law, which will go into effect in six months, has many components and will force more people to file under Chapter 13 bankruptcy. It would make it harder to wipe out most of the debts when income is above the state median (Nevada's median income for a family of four is \$56,550). When income is below the median, a Chapter 7 can still be filed if approved by the bankruptcy judge.

It will require a debtor with income above the state median and the ability to pay at least \$6,000 over five years (See LaGrande, Page 11)

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