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O.J. and the Multicultural Meritocracy

It is through politics, sports and crime that we can best understand the national character. The president's State of the Union Address, the Super Bowl and the opening arguments of the O.J. Simpson trial - all in one week - proved that politics and sports can no longer compete with crime and justice, California style.

The State of the Union - normally the annual event when Congress, the Cabinet and the Supreme Court bask in the presidential glow on prime-time television - looked like a convention led by the three Pillsbury doughboys: Al Gore, Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton. While the interminable presidential speech got most of the attention, the real story was the homogenized audience: the men and women all looked like they patronized the same tailor and hairstylist. Not one Anthony Mason-style haircut with "Contract With America" etched into a Republican scalp.

Whatever the ideological differences between Bill and Newt, there can be no doubt that they both rely on the same Nexus shampoo, "Simply Silver," to add blue highlights to their gray temples. As the camera panned the House chamber, I was struck by the absence of nose rings, fades or ponytails (with the notable exception of Colorado Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell), Versace suits and women in slacks. Pale gray pervaded the room. This is a government that is indistinguishable from the federal office buildings that line the District of Columbia avenues. No color, no character, no style; just a childlike faith that constitutional amendments can solve complex problems.

More than a century after the Civil War, the Super Bowl is a reminder of the progress we've made in civil rights. Now, when white men tell black men to run long distances in open fields, the runners get money and fame. If the NFL can get \$1 million a minute for commercials, it can surely eliminate the federal deficit faster than the new Congress. Any organization that keeps people watching Tony Bennett croon and Patti Labelle lip-synch when there is no athletic contest can surely balance the budget without a constitutional amendment.

The O.J. trial was the only television drama last week that allowed men and women of all colors to shine, compensating for a boring State of the Union speech and a runaway Super Bowl. Where else but in Los Angeles is the color of justice so vibrant? This is the only courtroom in the world in which the presiding judge is a Japanese American; the prosecutorial team is led by a female assisted by two men, one black and one white; and the most articulate defense counsel is a black man who has temporarily sedated the noisy Robert Shapiro. Of course, the courtroom, like Southern California politics, is weak on Latinos in leading roles.

Still, compared with the Super Bowl and the State of the Union, the O.J. trial proves that there is still room in America for individuals, regardless of color or gender, who blend talent with work and spunk. None of the principal players were Rhodes Scholars, went to Ivy League law schools or inherited family fortunes. The performers in O.J.'s high-tech courtroom drama do not read their lines from a TelePrompter or rely on coaches to call the plays.

No wonder the O.J. trial is more compelling than prime-time sports or politics. Is there an NFL team owner, cabinet secretary or congressional committee chair who could compete in Judge Lance Ito's courtroom? I don't think so.

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