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Views From the Jury Box

Maybe help is on the way for those who are distraught over the O.J. Simpson verdict.

If we get all 12 jurors on the record we may know how they reached a conclusion that has whites talking about revamping the jury system, while blacks dance in the streets. Some of us thought from the outset that handsome, hollow-cheeked O.J. Simpson had committed the crime—and that he would walk. He personified American obsessions with sports and celebrity, wealth and good looks.

Two members of the jury have stepped forward. Both vowed they had not discussed the case during their long incarceration. They claimed that race had nothing to do with the outcome, and one woman, Brenda Moran, said they disregarded Simpson's record as a wife-beater, finding it "a waste of time." Johnnie Cochran's offhand explanation during the summing-up—"He's a human being. He's not perfect"—seemed to suffice.

The jury's decision was reached with breathtaking speed, suggesting a contempt for the court that was easy to understand. They had been cooped up for nine months, at the mercy of a star-struck judge who milked every moment for the cameras and sent them out of the room whenever anything interesting was coming down. They had been subject to days of questions about DNA evidence they did not understand and introduced to a Los Angeles Police Department detective who was a raving racist and a reminder to the 10 black jurors of the beatings and torture their people had undergone at such hands for generations.

The length of the proceedings and the melodramatic nature of some of the exchanges constitute a powerful argument for outlawing television from the courtrooms. The pell-mell quality of the deliberations would suggest that sequestration is a legal tool to be most sparingly used. Nothing, of course, can be done about California juries. They have a notoriously short attention span. The Menendez case is overwhelming proof of their propensity for being distracted. Two brothers who shot their mother and father in cold blood are still around because they preposterously were transformed into victims of child abuse. Context is a big thing in California, although relevance is not—particularly to Judge Lance Ito, who seemed more anxious to fulfill his responsibilities to community and ethnic sensibilities than to the law.

The defense triumph was making it easy for the jury to forget that the trial

was about two bloody murders, that beautiful blond Nicole Simpson and her unlucky friend Ron Goldman had been hacked to pieces by a maniac with a newly sharpened knife.

But Cochran, with Ito's light hands on the reins, charged about the courtroom changing the subject—egregiously comparing detective Mark Fuhrman to Hitler—and ended up with a call to strike a blow for civil rights. Playing the race card is always unconscionable, but doing it in a double murder trial is a disgrace, even if inept prosecutors have handed it to you in the person of the odious Fuhrman, bigot of the year. His Honor didn't seem to mind, however.

But Cochran and company could not have done so brilliantly without a huge assist from the prosecution. Marcia Clark and Christopher Darden were conscientious, but their handmaidens in presenting the case were members of the LAPD and a sorrier lot it is hard to imagine. From failing to send the medical examiner for hours after the murders, failing to issue a warrant for a search of Simpson's home, to sending Fuhrman, they fell all over themselves in what looked like an attempt to compromise the case. They gave the jurors a perfect excuse to get all wrapped up in the process instead of concentrating on Simpson.

Another juror, Lionel Cryer, who was interviewed by the Los Angeles Times, said, "We felt that there were some problems . . . that they were trying to cover their rear ends."

Moran, who was escorted to a CNN news conference by a voluble young lawyer, summed up the ineptitude: "The glove did not fit." She was referring to the prosecution's most graphic setback, when Simpson could not pull on the bloody glove that had been found—or as the prosecution preferred, "planted"—by Fuhrman. "I couldn't believe anything he said. . . . In plain English, the glove didn't fit."

All this helped Moran reach her certainty: "I know O.J. didn't do it." They did not think of what would happen outside if they found Simpson guilty. The specter of riots in Los Angeles did not cross their minds. Race, Moran said, "didn't have nothing to do with this trial and this case."

She has a right to her opinion, of course. And jurors have the last word. But hers is a minority view. Blacks and whites are facing each other over a widened divide, and one of the many consequences of the earthquake verdict is that people talk of beseeching retired Gen. Colin Powell to lead them over the chasm.