

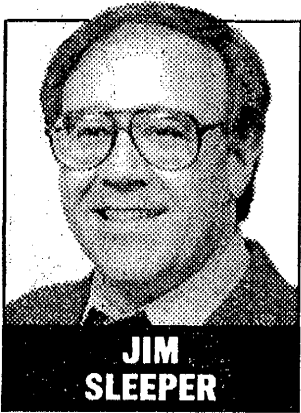
LORENA'S LEGACY

They support the Bobbitt verdict, but what message does it send to others who are abused and angry?

JIM SLEEPER
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The devil is in the details of our bias for Lorena



JIM
SLEEPER

To those who celebrated Friday's Lorena Bobbitt verdict as symbolic of a power shift against male oppression: Yes, I under-

stand what made Lorena Bobbitt do it — the brutality, terror, humiliation and trauma heaped upon an admittedly fragile, limited woman who was simply trying to live a decent life. I sympathize even if she wasn't insane — even if, as one editorial put it, "she knew what she was doing but no longer cared."

But I understand what made Bernhard Goetz do it, too — the brutality, terror, humiliation and trauma heaped on a troubled but quiet man who was simply trying to live his life before he got mugged, got no justice and felt he must keep it from happening again. Goetz, too, was celebrated by people who found his acquittal on attempted murder charges symbolic of a power shift — this time between helpless subway passengers and their tormentors.

And I understand Katherine Ann Power, the '60s radical who confessed complicity in a politically driven robbery that took a Boston cop's life. The bombs falling on Vietnam seemed to her another Holocaust committed by "good Germans." Someone, however helpless, had to throw her body on the machine and stop it, and Power tried.

And I understand what made Michael Griffin kill abortion doctor David Gunn in Pensacola last year — the brutality, the terror of the continuing slaughter of innocents, as Griffin saw it, guided by deep

faith; his anguish at finding no other way to stop the carnage, to make people listen.

I even understand the Menendez boys. What I don't understand is why people who defend the Bobbitt verdict don't sympathize with the others on the list. What all of the above are saying is that if you feel abused and angry enough, you may take a knife or a gun to the abuser, even when immediate self-defense isn't at issue. You needn't appeal to others' judg-

*In case after case,
our passions are
cutting down the law.*

ment or exhaust all legal remedies before you act.

What I also don't understand is how people who defend the Bobbitt verdict can call for more nonviolent conflict-resolution programs in schools. These programs teach that when someone is abusing or humiliating you, there are other options besides a knife or gun.

I want all those who celebrate Lorena Bobbitt to explain their position to a non-violence workshop at Thomas Jefferson High School in East New York, where a youth who felt abused by another went home, got a gun and shot him.

I certainly don't understand how people who celebrate Lorena Bobbitt can celebrate Martin Luther King Jr., who witnessed and suffered the brutality, terror and humiliation that countless blacks had known. In his time, the law routinely acquitted blacks' tormentors, as it did John

Wayne Bobbitt. Surely, then, by Bobbitt standards, King would have been justified in picking up a knife or a gun to effect a power shift between racist whites and oppressed blacks.

King disagreed, of course, and his insistence on nonviolence must confound and enrage Lorena Bobbitt's boosters. So must his idea of civil disobedience: Even those who break the law peacefully to show that the law itself is wrong should pay the legal penalty for it. I wonder if those who celebrate the Bobbitt verdict understand why.

King reasoned that those who fight institutional oppression must recognize that since one person's oppression is another's idea of justice, we'll always need a legal process to mediate the passionate subjectivity of people as different as Katherine Ann Power and Michael Griffin.

As St. Thomas More warned, if, in order to catch the devil, you cut down all the laws that shield him, you'll find that once you've cornered him and he turns 'round to lunge at you, there'll be no laws left standing between him and you.

THAT'S JUST what our increasingly therapeutic society is doing: letting our passions cut down the law. "It is hard to overcome revulsion to violence of any kind," opines The New York Times, "but in this case the jury can be forgiven for finding a reason to excuse Mrs. Bobbitt's brutality; brutality she herself endured too long."

It's an amazing statement, not because she doesn't deserve sympathy, but because sympathy for her, as for Goetz or Griffin, should come after the verdict, if at all. If sympathy bends the verdict itself, it bends the law, loosing the devil in each of us and leaving none of us free.