

FRANK RICH

My Hero, Janet Jackson

IT may be a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it. Two weeks after the bustier bust, almost no one has come to the defense of Janet Jackson. I do so with a full heart.

By baring a single breast in a slam-dunk publicity stunt of two seconds' duration, this singer also exposed just how many boobs we have in this country. We owe her thanks for a genuine public service.

You can argue that Ms. Jackson is the only honest figure in this Super Bowl of hypocrisy. She was out to accomplish a naked agenda — the resuscitation of her fading career on the eve of her new album's release — and so she did. She's not faking much remorse, either. Last Sunday she refused to appear on the Grammys rather than accede to CBS's demand that she perform a disingenuous, misty-eyed ritual "apology" to the nation for her crime of a week earlier. By contrast, Justin Timberlake, the wimp who gave the English language the lasting gift of "wardrobe malfunction," did as he was told, a would-be pop rebel in a jacket and a tie, looking like a schoolboy reporting to the principal's office. Ms. Jackson, one suspects, is laughing all the way to the bank.

There are plenty of Americans to laugh at, starting with the public itself. If we are to believe the general outcry, the nation's families were utterly blindsided by the Janet-Justin pas de deux while watching an entertainment akin to "Little Women." As Laura Bush put it, "Parents wouldn't know to turn their television off before that happened." They wouldn't? In the two-plus hours "before that happened," parents saw not only the commercials featuring a crotch-biting dog, a flatulent horse and a potty-mouthed child but also the number in which the crotch-grabbing Nelly successfully commanded a gaggle of cheerleaders to rip off their skirts. What signal were these poor, helpless adults waiting

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or before pulling their children away from the set? Apparently nothing short of a simulated rape would do.

Once the deed was done, the audience couldn't stop watching it. TV viewers with TiVo set an instant-replay record as they slowed down the offending imagery with a clinical alacrity heretofore reserved for the Zapruder film. Lycos, the Internet search engine, reported that the number of searches for Janet Jackson tied the record set by 9/11-related searches on and just after 9/11.

"That a single breast received as much attention as the first attack on United States soil in 60 years is beyond belief," wrote Aaron Schatz, the columnist on the Lycos Top 50 site. (Though not, perhaps, to the fundamentalist zealots who attacked us.)

For those who still couldn't get enough, the cable news channels giddily played the video over and over to remind us of just how deplorable it was. Even though by this point the networks were blurring the breast with electronic pasties, there was still an erotic kick to be milked: the act of a man tearing off a woman's clothes was as thrilling to the audience as whatever flesh was revealed therein, perhaps more so. But to say that aloud is to travel down a road that our moral watchdogs do not want to take. It's the unwritten rule of our culture that the public is always right. The "folks," as Bill O'Reilly is fond of condescending to them, are always the innocent victims of the big, bad cultural villains. They're never complicit in the crime. The idea that the folks might have the free will to tune out tasteless TV programming or do without TV altogether — or that they might eat up the sleaze, with or without young 'uns in the room — is almost never stated on television, for obvious reasons of fiscal self-interest. You don't insult your customers.

Since the public is blameless for its role in creating a market for displays like the Super Bowl's, who should be the scapegoat instead? If you peruse Mr. O'Reilly's admonitions in his first three programs dealing with the topic, or the tirades of The Wall Street Journal editorial page and right-wing direct-mail mills like the Parents Television Council and Concerned Women for America, you'll find a revealing pattern: MTV, CBS and their parent corporation, Viacom, are the exclusive targets of the invective. The National Football League is barely mentioned, if at all. To blame the



Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake at the end of their Super Bowl performance.

country's highest-rated sports operation, after all, might risk insulting the football-watching folks to whom these moral watchdogs pander for fun and profit.

But the N.F.L. is in the sex business as assiduously as CBS and MTV, and for the same reason: it wants those prurient eyeballs. It's now been more than a quarter-century since Super Bowl X, when the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders first caught the attention of the nation. "The audience deserves a little sex with its violence," Chuck Milton, a CBS sports producer, said back then.

The N.F.L. has since worked tirelessly to fill that need. This year was not the first MTV halftime show that the league has ordered to try to expand its aging audience beyond the Levitra demographic. The first such collaboration, Super Bowl XXXV three years ago, featured Britney Spears all but falling out of a halter top and numbers in which both Mr. Timberlake (then appearing with 'NSync) and Nelly grabbed their crotches. There was, to my eye, twice as much crotch-grabbing then as there was this year, but that show generated no outrage whatsoever.

It did, however, attract two million more viewers than the game itself. The N.F.L. wanted more of the same for 2004, which is why the league's commissioner, Paul Tagliabue, released a statement saying, "We're pleased to work again with MTV" when announcing the encore. Or pleased up to a point. When MTV proposed that part of the show be devoted to a performance of the song

"An American Prayer" by Bono to increase awareness of the horrific AIDS epidemic in Africa, the N.F.L. said no — even though Bono had done the league the favor of giving the 2002 Super Bowl halftime show a dignified musical tribute to the victims of the 9/11 attacks.

The mention of a sexually transmitted disease might dampen the libido of the salacious MTV show that the N.F.L. wanted this year and wanted so badly that the league remained silent even when MTV's pregame publicity promised that the performance would contain "some shocking moments." As one participant in the production told me, the N.F.L. saw "every camera angle" at the show's rehearsals and thus was no less aware of its general tone than CBS and MTV were. You don't hire Ms. Jackson, who's been steadily exposing more of her breasts for over a decade on magazine covers, to sing "Rock Your Body" if you have a G-rated game plan. Nonetheless, Joe Browne, the league's flak, pleaded total innocence after the event, releasing a hilarious statement that the N.F.L., like the public, was the unwitting victim of a show that it had both commissioned and helped supervise: "We applaud the F.C.C.'s investigation into the MTV-produced halftime. We and our fans were embarrassed by the entire show."

That investigation, piggybacked by last week's Congressional hear-

No one wants to say that the halftime viewers are as guilty as CBS.

ings, is an election-year stunt as full of hot air as the Bud Light horse flatulence ad. "Like millions of Americans, my family and I gathered around the television for a celebration," declared Michael Powell, the F.C.C. chairman, upon announcing that the entire halftime would be examined. A celebration of what, exactly? Didn't Mr. Powell, the nation's chief television regulator, watch the previous MTV halftime show?

He promises to conduct the investigation himself — a meaningless gesture, though it may gain him an audience and perhaps a photo op with Ms. Jackson. Mr. Powell's real agenda here is to conduct a show trial that might counter his well-earned reputation as a wholly owned subsidiary of our media giants. Viacom has

been a particularly happy beneficiary of the deregulatory push of his reign, buying up every slice of the media pie that's not nailed down. Should CBS be found guilty of "indecentcy" by the feds, the total penalty would amount to some \$5 million, roughly the price of two 30-second Super Bowl commercials. Congress's new push to increase those fines tenfold is just as laughable. Viacom took in \$26.6 billion last year.

Not for nothing did the company's stock actually go up the day after the Super Bowl. The halftime show was great merchandising for both MTV and CBS, the go-to network for "Victoria's Secret Fashion Show." Not to be left without a piece of the action, even NBC got into the act. Citing the Jackson flap, it decreed that two split-second shots of an 80-year-old woman's breast in an emergency room sequence in "E.R." be excised. But the "E.R." star Noah Wyle then went on NBC's "Today" show the morning of the broadcast to joke about the decision, and the network-owned NBC affiliate in New York used the banned breast as a promo for its post-"E.R." news broadcast: "What you won't see on tonight's episode of 'E.R.' — at 11!" Thus did NBC successfully transform its decision not to bare geriatric flesh into a sexual tease to hype ratings. This is true marketing genius, American-style.

What's next? Some are predicting that all the tape delays being injected into TV events to pre-empt future wardrobe malfunctions will be the death of spontaneous, live TV. But the moment an awards show takes ratings hit, this new electronic prophylactic will be quietly abandoned by the networks even faster than the N.F.L.'s vague threat not to collaborate with MTV next year.

Ms. Jackson, the biggest winner in this whole escapade, is already back on the air. Her official rehabilitation began right after the Super Bowl, when BET started broadcasting a 1 part series of "special Black History Month" spots in which she profiles historical luminaries like Harriet Tubman, Paul Robeson and Sidney Poitier.

"Her tone is serious and focused with the air and diction of a seasoned lecturer," says the network's news release, which also notes that "the spots feature Ms. Jackson clad in classic black." Wasn't her Super Bowl dominatrix costume classic black as well? Well, never underestimate the power of synergy. BET is another wholly owned subsidiary of Viacom.