



Basket Case

MJ and globalization

By Thurston Domina

When the Chicago Bulls visited former Sen. Bill Bradley on the floor of the Senate chamber, the one-time New York Knick explained "the process of legislation and how it related to basketball" to the world championship team. As Bradley remembers the moment, in the introduction to his basketball memoir, *Life on the Run*, "Michael Jordan, leaning up against the majority leader's desk, looked so comfortable there that I wondered whether someday ... he would take the plunge into politics."

Bradley probably was projecting: He had taken the plunge, and he figured that Jordan, somebody he liked and respected, wanted to do so as well. For a host of reasons, this was off base: Bradley and Jordan don't have a great deal in common. Sure, both men played basketball professionally, but Jordan was famous for flying over opponents, while Bradley himself admits that "with my limited jumping ability I'm not much on the dunk." Jordan grew up black in the North Carolina of the '60s and '70s; Bradley was the son of a white banker in Crystal City, Mo. Jordan attended recently integrated high schools, and was trained by his mother to ignore the racism he encountered; Alex, the African-American man who helped Bradley's parents around the house for 50 years, raised young Bill's first basketball hoop for him. Jordan skipped his senior year at the University of North Carolina to enter into the NBA draft; Bradley spent two years as a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford after graduating from Princeton, taking a break from basketball and wondering whether professional play was for him.

The differences go on: Jordan is a masterful endorser—at his peak he made \$30 million a year for dribbling a basketball and \$100 million a year for hawking Nike shoes, McDonald's hamburgers, Hollywood movies and Hanes underwear. Bradley, on the other hand, earnestly refused product endorsements during his basketball career, worrying that he was desirable just for being a white face in an increasingly black game and deciding, "I wanted no part of an advertising industry which created socially useless personal needs and then sold a product to meet those needs."

Most importantly, however, Bradley wants to be the next President of the United States. It's tough to imagine Jordan wanting such an inconsequential job. Michael Jordan is the man whose name could be heard echoing out of the dormitories of Beijing University during the NBA's 1998 championship series. He's the basketball star who beat the Martian oppressors in *Space Jam* to save Bugs Bunny and the Looney Tunes crew from extraterrestrial enslavement. He's the guy sociologist and cultural critic Harry Edwards calls "the epitome of human potential, creativity and spirit." After all that, Michael Jordan, President of the United States of America sounds a little anti-climactic. Michael Jordan, King of the World would be more like it.

Walter LaFeber's new book, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, begins with the innocent thought that it is an exceedingly odd thing that Jordan, a nice enough guy who could play basketball like no other, ought to end up a shoo-in candidate for global kingship. LaFeber, whose earlier works are considerably drier academic treatises on diplomatic history, looks for explanation in Jordan's

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