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New Haven ruling adds to Sotomayor debate

Julie Hirschfeld Davis

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court's reversal Monday of a racial discrimination decision endorsed by Sonia Sotomayor as a federal appeals judge provided fresh ammunition for her critics two weeks before her Senate confirmation hearing, but it's unlikely to sink her nomination.

The ruling that white New Haven, Conn., firefighters were unfairly denied promotions because of their race became an instant talking point for conservative foes of Sotomayor. They argued that her court's decision to the contrary last year shows she would be an activist who allows her biases — particularly her backing of affirmative action policies — to taint her judgment.

Still, the 5-4 decision, which was expected on a court whose conservative majority has recently moved to narrow measures meant to combat racial discrimination, is hardly a clear-cut rebuke to Sotomayor.

Sotomayor's supporters noted that the appeals court decision followed well-established legal precedents — something conservatives routinely say judges should do. They also pointed out that she did not actually write the appeals court deci-

sion, but was rather one member of a three-judge panel that rejected the white firefighters' claim of discrimination.

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process. Conservatives who cheered it as a blow for even-handed application of anti-discrimination laws said it deepened their questions about Sotomayor's ability to keep her personal opinions and background out of her decisions.

"This case will only raise more questions in the minds of the American people concerning Judge Sotomayor's commitment to treat each individual fairly and not as a member of a group," said Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, the senior Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Democrats countered that the decision should in fact end questions about whether Sotomayor is an "activist judge."

Sotomayor and her panel "did what judges are supposed to do," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., the Judiciary Committee's chairman. "They followed precedent." He called that overturned appeals court

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Pop superstar Michael Jackson performs in Tel Aviv, Israel, in front of some 60,000 fans on Sept. 19, 1993. Throughout his life, Jackson, who died June 25 at age 50, had a complicated relationship with his blackness. (AP photo/Jerome Delay)

Jackson's complex color story transcended race

Jesse Washington

Michael Jackson had a complicated relationship with his blackness.

Over the course of his 40 years in the public eye, Jackson's skin lightened, his hair changed from Afro to bone-straight perm, and his wide nose was surgically whittled down to a point. His music went from R&B to pure pop and beyond. His close friends included Elizabeth Taylor and Nancy Reagan.

By the time his last smash hit, "Black or White," was released in 1991, many people wondered if the song title applied to Jackson himself.

But those who knew him well say he always maintained his black identity. And as a trailblazer for a new breed of global multimedia stars, he helped create an era in which race was a piece, rather than the definition, of a person.

"I think that Michael really, in his career, just transcended race. His work and his life [were] sort of about undefining race," said Bill Bottrell, who co-produced "Black or White" and worked closely with Jackson from 1986 into the early '90s.

"He obscured the issue, or ob-

scured it at least as far as he was concerned, or just transcended the issue," Bottrell said. "I watched him with his friends. They came from all walks of life. He certainly surrounded himself with lots of African Americans, also a lot of white people, including me."

Jackson grew up in hardscrabble Gary, Ind., performing with his brothers. The Jackson 5 were weaned on rhythm and blues, a name coined in the 1940s to describe the fusion of several black music styles with a new instrument, the electric bass.

The first Jackson 5 album was released in 1969 on the Motown label, which carved a place in history by

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Pols make pitches at Rox candidate forum

Sandra Larson

Candidates in the Boston mayoral race presented capsule versions of their campaign platforms and answered questions for an audience of more than 150 at a forum held Monday night in Dudley Square.

City Councilors-at-Large Michael F. Flaherty and Sam Yoon and construction business owner Kevin McCrea — the three challengers to Mayor Thomas M. Menino in the Sept. 22 preliminary election — shared the stage at the Roxbury Center for Arts at Hibernian Hall with 18 City Council hopefuls. The event was sponsored by the National Black College Alliance (NBCA) as part of its "Greatest MINDS" series

of networking, career and civic engagement discussions for black professionals.

Menino was unable to attend, organizers said.

Host George R. "Chip" Greenidge Jr., founder and president of NBCA, emphasized the goal of informing people about the candidates in order to help them become more involved in the political process.

"We need to pick a candidate and support them," he said. "That's the role we need to take. These kids here tonight are going to be watching us."

He lauded the large number of candidates crowded together at a long table on the stage. Twelve of the 15 certified candidates for at-large slots

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Nataka Crayton-Walker (left), president of United Neighbors of Lower Roxbury (UNLR) and daughter of the late former District 7 Boston City Councilor Tony Crayton, and UNLR board member Bobby Walker III were married on Saturday, June 20, 2009, in the Frederick Douglass Peace Garden on Tremont Street in Roxbury. (Lolita Parker Jr. photo)

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