

# BILL COSBY, RAPIST? THAT'S A LOT TO FORGIVE

**W**ow. Just ... wow. So what's next? Will it turn out Mother Teresa was a pornographer? Or Mr. Rogers a meth head? Is Billy Graham running a prostitution ring? Why not? Such ridiculous scenarios seem far less so in the wake of recent news. Namely, renewed accusations that Bill Cosby is a serial rapist.

Bill Cosby, the genial, avuncular comic who has made us laugh forever. Bill Cosby, the sleek secret agent who wisecracked with Robert Culp as they fought the Cold War on "I Spy." Bill Cosby, the wise, warm, witty father on "The Cosby Show," the '80s sitcom that resurrected sitcoms, saved NBC and made him America's Dad. Bill Cosby, the friendly pitchman for Jell-O, Coca-Cola and old-school values, the door-opening pioneer who helped make possible the likes of Chris Rock, Denzel Washington and Jamie Foxx.

How do you get from all that to ... serial rapist? And make no mistake: These allegations do not "tarnish" his legacy. If true, they become his legacy, reducing to a distant second all his achievements, all those aspirational lectures about values, all those doors he opened and laughter he earned.

## LEONARD PITTS



COMMENTARY

Granted, Americans are exceptionally forgiving of their celebrities. Having served time for obstruction of justice, Martha Stewart is back doing her cooking and crafts shtick. Paula Deen, after allegations of racial discrimination, is cooking again. Kobe Bryant, accused of rape, is still playing basketball. Convicted rapist Mike Tyson has a new cartoon show.

But Cosby is likely to find the road back to respectability much more difficult or simply impossible. In the first place, the crime he is accused of — drugging and raping several women — is particularly heinous. In the second place, it is spectacularly at odds with the person we thought he was for 50 years. In the third place, it allegedly went on for so long. Half a dozen women have now come forward to accuse Cosby of sexual assault in incidents stretching from 1969 to 2004.

Yes, America is a forgiving nation. But that's a lot to forgive.

Cosby, for what it is worth, has never been prosecuted, much less found guilty, of any of these allegations, most of which were first revealed almost 10 years ago. He has long maintained his innocence, though he settled a lawsuit brought by one accuser, Andrea Constand, in 2006. The terms of the settlement were not disclosed.

It should also be noted that the allegations of another accuser — model Janice Dickinson — are contradicted by her own words. In her 2002 book, "No Lifeguard on Duty," she describes her encounter with Cosby thusly: He slams a door in her face when she refuses to sleep with him. Not the height of class, but not rape, either.

On the other hand, it is difficult to ignore or explain away the fact that six women are all telling the same lurid tale.

One is left then with the dull, dispiriting irresolution that is so often the residue of a story you want to be untrue and fear is not.

The moral of the tale, to the degree you can tease one out, is a lesson we are often taught but never seem to learn. It has to do with fame and its deceits and how readily we con ourselves into thinking we "know" some person because we saw a show or read an interview.

We tend to forget that show business is, after all, the business of creating illusions.

Cosby's fall reinforces that truism in a bruising and unforgiving fashion.

Have you ever learned something you wished you didn't know? That's how this story feels. You want to slam hands over ears and sing nonsense syllables until it goes away.

But things don't work like that. Ultimately, you can only struggle with your own sense of disappointment. And betrayal. And sheer, slack-jawed amazement.

Bill Cosby, serial rapist?

Wow. Just ... wow.

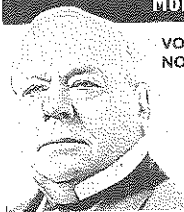
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