

*Richard Cohen*

## Bill Cosby's Best Pitch

My colleague Marc Fisher tells a story about Bill Cosby. The comedian had contracted to make a speech in Washington, not knowing he was to talk to a group mostly consisting of followers of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the Korean-born figure whose movement is often likened to a cult. Cosby wanted out, but a contract was a contract and so, in an anguished midnight conversation with Fisher, Cosby said he would donate his fee to charity. It was a reported \$150,000.

Never mind that most of the other speakers—former president Jerry Ford included—made no such pledge nor showed any misgivings. What matters, really, was that this was just another example of Cosby trying to do the right thing—even if it cost him some money and, as his speech that day showed, some anguish. He went on with the show, giving what Fisher called “an unsmiling, perfunctory performance of 16 minutes’ length.” To both Cosby and his audience, it must have seemed twice as long.

More recently, of course, Cosby gave yet another unsmiling performance as a witness in the extortion trial of Autumn Jackson, the

22-year-old woman who claims to be his daughter. She demanded \$40 million from him, threatening otherwise to take her story to the supermarket tabloids.

What’s stunning about Jackson’s attempt is that she was doubly wrong about Cosby. She clearly expected that he would cave and give her something. Instead, he went to the cops, and now some judge is going to give her what she deserves. (Last week, she and two others were convicted in the attempt to extort money from Cosby.) But she was also wrong in thinking that her accusation would so damage Cosby that it was worth \$40 million to keep her quiet.

Cosby’s career as a pitchman is not what it used to be—and that was the case before Autumn Jackson surfaced. But my guess is that her charges—and his admission that he did have sex with her mother—will not materially harm him. That’s because Cosby is not, as some commentators say, merely a media creation but, as my colleague discovered, a person of genuine values.

One of those values is charity. Back in 1988, Cosby and his wife, Camille, gave \$20

million to Spelman College, a traditionally black women’s college in Atlanta. His donation, he said at the time, was both a contribution and a challenge to other wealthy African Americans to dig deep into their pockets to support black institutions. Previously the couple had donated \$1 million to Fisk University in Nashville.

A good comedian can be a great teacher. What we can learn through this recent Cosby episode is the importance of context. Most people, it seemed, heard Cosby’s admission of an extramarital affair and judged it, rightly, as an insignificant blemish on an otherwise admirable persona. It did not—it could not—cancel out all that was good about the man.

This lesson in context is going to be hard to accept for those who believe, sometimes with religious fervor, that we are all one thing or another—saint or sinner. We have learned this about Bill Clinton. When he was just another Democrat campaigning for his party’s nomination in New Hampshire in 1992, it mattered greatly that Gennifer Flowers said they had an affair. After all, most Americans knew little else about Clinton.

Now, though, Clinton is president of a prosperous and peaceful nation, and Gennifer Flowers seems to matter a whole lot less.

Clinton persevered. Gary Hart did not. Here again, an unknown presidential aspirant suffered terribly because, at the time, all that most Americans knew about him was that he had entertained a woman other than his wife at his Washington, D.C., town house and on a boat named “Monkey Business.” In a heartbeat, Hart was a goner—exiled into ignominy. For him, there was no “on the other hand.”

In some quarters, Cosby is being called a hypocrite for not being the character he played on television. But so what? He is the man he played off the screen. That person has been charitable and ethical, a fitting role model to people who need such a thing. Offstage, he was also the father of the late Ennis Cosby, a young man whose murder illuminated a life so commendable it seemed unreal.

Cosby’s days as a pitchman may be behind him, but they are hardly over. He has pitched Jell-O and Kodak, but his best was always Bill Cosby. It still is.

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2 proposals  
livability

E. J. Dionne Jr.

## Where Would You Like To Live?

What makes a community a place where people like to live?

There's the obvious: good schools, good job opportunities, low crime rates and friendly neighbors. Getting rid of ghastly traffic jams would no doubt calm the nerves and raise the spirits. Maybe the tax laws could make it as easy for your employer to give you free transit tickets as it is to give you a free parking space.

Planting trees along streets makes neighborhoods look better, raises property values and invites people outside, creating more neighborliness. Perhaps bike paths would appeal to you, and maybe you'd like more flowers along the public highways. Those flowers could save your community money because they provide natural erosion control.

Big shopping malls have their benefits, but it might be nice if zoning laws encouraged what the planners call "mixed use" neighborhoods. You could walk to the market or the toy store. And maybe citizens ought to have more opportunity to affect how gobs of federal transportation money are spent in their communities.

These are the kinds of questions that excite Rep. Earl Blumenauer, a freshman Democrat from Oregon. Blumenauer, an intense but friendly 43-year-old, was a city commissioner in Portland and has spent most of his adult life thinking locally. His driving concern: "We have stopped making communities in which people want to live and are making communities where people drive through."

He gushes with ideas about what government can do to foster neighborhoods that people might enjoy—sometimes by not doing things and not spending money. He's come to Washington to preach his gospel and affect federal legislation where he can. If he can have an impact, people might start paying attention to what happens here again.

Blumenauer is part of one of the most exciting (and least noticed) movements in the country. It's an emerging effort to look at our metropolitan areas whole and figure out how we might reorganize the way we spend money, make decisions and organize growth.

Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening is in the forefront of this new thinking. His "Smart Growth" initiative springs from a simple question: If urban sprawl is a problem, why should taxpayer money be spent to subsidize it? Doesn't it make sense to require developers instead of taxpayers to pick up some of the costs of sprawl, such as building sewers, roads and schools, and concentrate scarce government money on repairs in existing cities and suburbs?

Blumenauer represents the coming of age of the "small is beautiful" approaches of the 1970s. He's acutely aware of the need to make such ideas sound practical and not flaky. He doesn't want to be seen as trying to compel anybody to move out of their suburb or to junk their car. "Compulsion and sticks—that's not how the American people work," he says.

But many government policies have unintended effects. The parking issue is a classic. Right now, you can accept free parking from your employer worth up to \$170 a month tax-free. But the tax-free ceiling on transit passes or car pooling is only \$65. Blumenauer is co-sponsoring a bill introduced by Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) to equalize the benefit.

Another interesting issue: If you sell your house, make a profit and buy an equally or more expensive house, you pay no capital gains tax. But if you buy a cheaper house, you pay tax on the part of the profit you don't spend on the new house.

The effect of this, says Blumenauer, is to encourage people to buy more house than they need, and it discourages investment in cheaper inner-city or near suburban areas. To reduce this incentive, he'd lift the capital gains tax exemption on home sales to \$500,000. Some change along these lines, already endorsed by President Clinton and many Republicans, will likely be part of the budget agreement.

A couple of other Blumenauerisms: "Low-cost, low-tech solutions really work." Sometimes planting pretty flowers is cheaper than building a big anti-erosion project. Or: "It's better to spend the money we have now more wisely than to spend a lot more money after the fact on the dysfunction we've created."

I've listened to too many Beach Boys songs to be against the car, and know too many people who are happy in new subdivisions to be against suburbs. But if we don't start answering the questions Blumenauer is asking, we may plan, build and subsidize our way into a world we don't much like and wonder why we didn't think about what we were doing.

Tom

Tom

Mary

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