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## **BILL COSBY**

It is ironic that the legendary African-American actor, comic, and musician – Dr. William H. “Bill” Cosby – would have his own entry in an encyclopedia on racism, but such inclusion is understandable given remarks he made on May 17, 2004 at an NAACP event celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Cosby was born in 1937 and grew up in a housing project in Philadelphia. Cosby credits his paternal grandfather for teaching him how to be a story-teller and a comedian (Farhi 2009). Cosby dropped out of Temple University in the early 1960s for the shot at a career in stand-up comedy. He got his break in 1964 as co-star in the TV show *I Spy*, and became one of the first African-Americans to break through the color-line on television. In 1974 Cosby became spokesperson for Jell-O pudding pops, evincing a charm and charisma that appealed to people of all races. Cosby’s first major television project was *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, which ran through the 1970s and 1980s. His most successful venture was *The Cosby Show* which aired from 1984 to 1992, won multiple Emmy Awards, and made Cosby an icon of American fatherhood.

Cosby has always been political. In the 1980s he helped organize the Twentieth Anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington and he was also a leading voice against Apartheid in South Africa. Cosby won the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2002, the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in 2009, and was inducted in the Grammy Hall of Fame in

2012. On his television career, he comments, “I did what I did carefully, putting myself in a position to teach with that TV set,” (Deggans 2010, 3E).

On May 17, 2004, Cosby gave a speech to the NAACP which argued that “the lower economic and lower middle economic people” in the black community were making a travesty of civil rights accomplishments such as the *Brown* decision. They “are not holding their end in this deal,” Cosby (American Rhetoric) said. Cosby offered much tough love for the black community, restating – in his own inimitable way – much of what is known (and also criticized) in social science circles as the “culture of poverty thesis” which suggests that impoverished groups often establish cultural patterns and behaviors at odds with larger society and which can be inimical to social advancement. Cosby’s speech covered a range of social concerns impacting African-Americans, including low expectations and lax moral standards, illiteracy, negligent parenting, gun violence, teen pregnancy and promiscuity, lack of ambition, the limits of religion, Afro-centric names, body piercing, ebonics, attitudes of victimization, and prison. (See sidebar).

Cosby delivered his speech to much laughter and immediate applause. African-American luminaries such as Cornel West and Cory Booker publically praised him for his remarks. Much of the media congratulated Cosby on his candor. An editorial in *USA Today* (2006, 12) argued that, “destructive personal habits and low education expectations are crippling young black Americans, especially men. [Cosby] is just the voice America needs to break through the silence.” Yet the positive reviews were not universal. Some took issue with Cosby airing the black community’s dirty laundry in public and suggested his remarks played into the hands of white racism. Critics such as Michael Eric Dyson accused Cosby of having lost his mind by blaming the poor for conditions over which they have little control. He said Cosby should “pick on someone in his own class. If he had come out swinging at Condi Rice or Colin Powell, they

could defend themselves. But he's beating up on poor black people, the most vulnerable people in this nation. And why jump on them?" Dyson admits that, "taken in one sense, a lot of what he said we can agree with." Dyson's beef is that "Cosby never acknowledges that most poor blacks don't have a choice about these things" (in Soloman 2006, 12, 15).

Cosby has been unrepentant. He has called his words, "blunt, but not harsh" and refers to his critics as "intellectual panhandlers." He says: "You've got these idiots [who] say, 'Bill, you're picking on the poor'... Well, so did Jesus" (*Weekend Australian* 2008, 15). In 2006, Cosby embarked on a 20-city US tour, "A Call Out with Bill Cosby," in which he followed up on the themes of the NAACP speech and which laid the foundation of a book published the next year with Alvin Poussaint.

In recent years, Cosby had weathered multiple accusations of sexual assault with little apparent damage to his reputation, while remaining a strong advocate for social change. He has worked to create socially conscious hip-hop music, as an alternative to what he sees as the regressive, misogynistic and violent nature of much of the genre. He is still occasionally at odds with majority opinion in the African-American community. He suggested in the wake of the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin shooting, for example, that ineffective gun laws, more so than racism, were the main factor in the tragedy. At 75, Cosby is still performing stand-up and working with the Discovery Channel on a *Brown Hornet* show about the quixotic superhero of the same name from *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*. He remains a fierce critic of US society and culture.

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**SIDEBAR:**

“Ladies and gentlemen, listen to these people. They are showing you what’s wrong. People putting their clothes on backwards... People with their hat on backwards, pants down around the crack... Isn’t it a sign of something when she’s got her dress all the way up to the crack -- and got all kinds of needles and things going through her body?... Brown versus the Board of Education is no longer the white person’s problem. We’ve got to take the neighborhood back.... Just forget telling your child to go to the Peace Corps... It’s standing on the corner. It can’t speak English. It doesn’t want to speak English. I can’t even talk the way these people talk: “Why you ain’t where you is go ra?” ... Everybody knows it’s important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can’t land a plane with, “Why you ain’t...” You can’t be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth. There is no Bible that has that kind of language. Where did these people get the idea that they’re moving ahead on this... They’re not; they’re just hanging out in the same place, five or six generations sitting in the projects,” (American Rhetoric).

**Further Reading:**

American Rhetoric, “Speech to the NAACP on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education,” <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/billcosbypoundcakespeech.htm> (cited on February 4, 2013).

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Farhi, Paul. "Bill Cosby's Gift of Gab." *The Washington Post*, October 26, 2009.

Soloman, Deborah. "Bill Cosby's Not Funny." *The New York Times*. March 27, 2005.

*USA Today*. "Funnyman's Serious Message." May 22, 2006.

*Weekend Australian*. "Cosby to Blacks: Take Responsibility." May 3, 2008.