

Teaser:

**The Republic**

Will (Smith) Power

Tag: Column / The Republic

Headline:

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Body Text:

For April Fool's, I was going to use this column to pen a fake apology letter from Will Smith. In it, he would announce his resignation from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and a reduction in his filmmaking workload, so he'd have more time for therapy instead. Then on Friday, Smith beat me to the punch—pun intended.

In the real-life letter he wrote himself, the Oscar-winning, slap-happy actor apologized—a little more sincerely than the first two times for, in his words, “shocking, painful, and inexcusable,” and in the law's words, “felony assault and battery” of comedian and awards presenter Chris Rock on live TV. That's a good, good thing.

Yet the multi-layered partially rotting onion the Oscars telecast delivered to America's moral, cultural doorstep still needs more peeling. And it might make some people cry. What follows are some critical issues this episode taught us—or can teach us—as the incident resolves into the recesses of our collective PTSD, on the scale of somewhere between the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and that Super Bowl wardrobe malfunction shortly thereafter.

### **Conspiracy Thinking**

Although in the first instant slap-gate seemed like a goofy comedy bit, it only took a matter of seconds to realize it wasn't. How can we know? For starters, let's stop calling it a slap. Smith did in fact hit Rock with an open hand, like a slap. But it was hardly that kind of slap. Smith's wind up, arm speed, body mass, and pinpoint accuracy makes it a “strike” or a “blow” if we want to accurately describe the matter rather than gaslight it. How Rock, nearly 60, managed to only take a half step backward and—though visibly stunned—just Taylor Swift shake it off and announce the Best Documentary winner is befuddling, and impressive.

By the time Smith returned to his seat, he shouted from the depths of his inner hell a command at Rock. Then again, screaming it, with an F-bomb embedded both times, all on national TV. The incident was so clearly real, it became surreal and brought officers from the Los Angeles Police Department backstage to inform Rock he could press criminal charges.

Still, some folks think it was a publicity stunt. Simply, no. Smith and Rock and the Academy—whose existence relies on its credibility—would never take that much legal, financial, and moral risk for so little reward. The surreal nature of the incident affords you a moment to think unrealistically. Now, come back to reality, because this incident is probably more important than you think it is.

### **Bald Statues Matter**

It almost sounds rather cool to say the Oscars, the Hollywood elite, and their movie biases do not affect you. But just because you don't care about something, doesn't mean it doesn't matter. More than 15 million people tuned in to watch the show, and that's a down year compared to pre-pandemic.

Personally, I'm inspired by at least a few acceptance speeches each year. Ask people within the deaf community whether the Academy's accolades for "CODA" or deaf actor Troy Kotsur's acceptance speech for Best Actor in a Supporting Role matters. Listen to the unblemished gems delivered by Jessica Chastain (Best Actress, "The Eyes of Tammy Faye") and Ariana DeBose (Best Actress in a Supporting Role, "West Side Story") and think how anyone marginalized and/or suicidal might be better off if they were to see them perform their roles.

You see, the Academy matters, not because of the schwag bag we never get to see, the Vanity Fair party we never get to attend, or the red carpet attire most of us cannot afford to buy. It matters in the same way Meryl Streep's character in "Devil Wears Prada" says the fashion industry matters when Anne Hathaway's character, looking lumpy in a cerulean blue sweater, has just laughed inappropriately in a fashion magazine meeting with industry gurus anxiously discussing which belt goes best with a particular outfit. She half-apologizes, "Sorry, I'm still learning this stuff."

Streep then proceeds to school Hathaway in a classic monologue that ends with the line, "That blue you've got on represents billions of dollars and countless jobs, and it's sort of comical how you think you made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry, when really you're wearing a sweater that was selected *for* you by the people in *this* room, from a pile of ... *stuff*."

Ditto for the motion pictures, even the ones you didn't see or didn't like.

### **Sticks and Stones**

Quickly, after seeing Smith's insane reaction to Rock's words, many began to explain the assault and battery crime as a man protecting his woman. Jada Pinkett-Smith's stylish buzz cut was not the result of total hair loss from treatment for a life-threatening illness. It was a choice she made to manage her bout with alopecia, a condition where sometimes sections of hair can fall out.

The joke was pedestrian, not part of the script, and put Rock in the insult-comic category when he's actually one of the most insightful comedians of the past 30 years. Objectively, it draws awkward attention to a person's appearance with vapid comedic payoff, if any. In addition, context is everything. Jada received rave reviews on the red carpet and Rock's reference was to "GI Jane," a film character played by a young, svelte Demi Moore whose similar style hair triggered a hair fashion fad. Compared to nearly every other joke made at an individual that night and at every single award show in that industry, Rock's joke was not even offensive, categorically. It may be personally offensive to the Smiths, but that's on them to figure out.

Smith's wife did not require physically violent protection that night because she was never in harm's way. But Will and Jada's egos sure were. Not because of Rock (that'd be victim blaming), but because the Smiths were treated that night like royalty. And then, they both acted

like it, as their little prince watched on and shouted out to the Twitterverse about his dad's crime, "That's how we do it!"

### **Black on Black Crime**

The real issue here is not about what triggered one person's excessive and vulgar outburst. The real issue is how quickly Americans solve problems with violence and how we let our ego—not our body—drive us to violence. Because Smith and Rock are both black men, it prompts the question of whether Smith would have hit, say, Ricky Gervais, a white man who has hosted a number of Golden Globes award shows using scathing—and hilarious—jokes about people in the audience.

Would Smith have even gotten out of his seat if The Rock made the joke, rather than Chris Rock? Would it be understandable if Smith hit one of the three female hosts had they made the joke that night? Does the incident inspire more bigoted beliefs and specious arguments about things like black-on-black crime and Black Lives Matter? Did the Smiths' polyamorous relationship contribute to Will's lashing out at Rock? Slap-gate doesn't exist in a vacuum, it exists across a spectrum of contexts, surely one or more of which you are in.

The belief that a man must violently protect *his* woman—over *stuff* that was said—is a therapeutically removable, egotistical behavior rooted in patriarchy and it kills roughly 4,000 women every year in domestic violence disputes. Most of those deaths were probably not the result of self-defense. The deaths were more likely the result of something similar to the toxic-masculinity demonstrated by Smith.

And that's the only part of this Rock got wrong. Rock's only apology should be to those 4,000 women for letting his ego not press felony assault and battery charges against Will Smith. And the Academy should respond to Smith's resignation by demanding he pay them \$20 million—the typical price tag for Smith starring in a movie. Then, the organization that uses motion pictures to help protect liberties and freedoms could make a donation to any charity dedicated to preventing 4,000 women from dying before the Oscars show next year.

Now that would be the best story, and the most meaningful award, the industry could ever produce.