

# Rolling Stone magazine and the University of Virginia rape allegations

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The unraveling of the *Rolling Stone* feature story about a rape on the campus of the University of Virginia (UVA) has shed new light on the right-wing character of identity politics and those social layers obsessed with gender and race. It also underscores the reactionary essence of the regulations on sexual harassment that have been implemented at Harvard and other universities and colleges.

On November 19, *Rolling Stone*, the US biweekly magazine devoted primarily to popular culture, ran a 9,000 word story concerning the alleged horrific gang rape of an 18-year-old female student, “Jackie,” at a UVA fraternity house in Charlottesville, Virginia in September 2012. The article, by Sabrina Rubin Erdely, described the alleged ringleader of the attack, “Drew,” a fellow lifeguard of Jackie’s, and named the fraternity involved, Phi Kappa Psi. Erdely’s piece further accused the University of Virginia of mishandling the case and exhibiting “institutional indifference” to sexual violence.

By any objective standard, Erdely’s article was a defamatory travesty of journalism. One could hardly guess from the sensational headline, “A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA,” that the piece was entirely based on one young person’s claims. The article, in fact, is a mass of unsubstantiated allegations and anecdotes, stereotypes and dubious statistics. There is almost nothing in the article that can be pinned down as fact. It is neither convincing nor believable.

The author uses “alleged” and “allegation” merely as legally protective after-thoughts. The presumption of guilt predominates throughout. This passage is typical: “For months, Jackie had been assuaging her despair by throwing herself into peer education, but there was no denying her helplessness when she thought about Phi Psi, or about her own alleged assailants still walking the grounds. She’d recently been aghast to bump into Drew, who greeted her with friendly nonchalance. ‘For a whole year, I thought about how he had ruined my life, and how he is the worst human being ever,’ Jackie says. ‘And then I saw him and I couldn’t say anything.’”

Erdely’s foul article provoked an uproar. The fraternity house alleged to have been the scene of the crime was picketed and vandalized, and the university suspended all fraternity activity on the campus until January 2015. UVA President Teresa A. Sullivan addressed an open letter to students in which she promised that the institution would meanwhile “assemble groups of students, faculty, alumni, and other concerned parties to discuss our next steps in preventing sexual assault and sexual violence.”

Inevitably, the politicians weighed in, including Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe and US Senators Mark Warner and Tim Kaine. Kaine proclaimed, somewhat illogically, “The allegations of sexual assault depicted in a recent *Rolling Stone* article are beyond alarming and cannot be tolerated.” (How can conduct that is only alleged to have happened not be tolerated?)

The media enthusiastically picked up Erdely’s article. The *New York Times* could hardly contain itself. Two days after the appearance of the *Rolling Stone* piece, the “newspaper of record” published a column, “Does the University of Virginia Have a Culture of Silence Around Sexual Assault?,” which began, “‘At UVA,’ writes Sabrina Rubin Erdely, ‘rapes are kept quiet.’ But her *Rolling Stone* story about sexual assault at the University of Virginia has broken through what some say is a culture of silence around the issue.”

Three days later, the *Times* ran another piece, “University of Virginia’s Image Suffers After Campus Rape Report,” which observed, “The *Rolling Stone* article detailed what appeared to be the preplanned gang rape of a student in 2012 in an upstairs room of the Phi Kappa Psi house, followed by a botched response by the administration.”

Inevitably, that sage of pro-imperialist moralizing, the *Times*’ Nicholas Kristof, weighed in. His November 26 piece, headlined “Bill Cosby, UVA and Rape,” intoned: “We collectively are still too passive about sexual violence in our midst, too willing to make excuses, too inclined to perceive shame in being raped. These are attitudes that facilitate violence by creating a protective blanket of silence and impunity. In that sense, we are all enablers.”

Then, thanks to some journalists who were paying attention, the story began to fall apart.

On December 5, the *Washington Post* pointed to “key elements” of the account being “in doubt.”

Among those:

The fraternity in question has said it “has been working with police and has concluded that the allegations are untrue. Among other things, the fraternity said there was no event at the house the night the attack was alleged to have happened.” The accused were said to be “rushing” the fraternity, i.e., attempting to join it during a specific time period. However, the fraternity noted that such events take place only in the spring semester.

Furthermore, friends of Jackie’s have disputed the *Rolling Stone*’s version of her physical condition the night of the alleged attack (“face beaten, dress spattered with blood”). According to the *Post*,

“The friends said that details of the attack have changed over time and that they have not been able to verify key points in recent days.”

One of those identified as an attacker, “a junior in 2012 who worked with her as a university lifeguard ... was actually the name of a student who belongs to a different fraternity, and no one by that name has been a member of Phi Kappa Psi.” The individual in question spoke to the *Post* and indicated he had worked at the Aquatic and Fitness Center “and was familiar with Jackie’s name. But he added that he never met Jackie in person and never took her out on a date. He also said he was not a member of Phi Kappa Psi.”

Erdely never attempted to speak to the alleged attackers or anyone at the fraternity. *Rolling Stone* issued a statement December 5 in the name of managing editor Will Dana, which read, in part: “In the face of new information reported by the *Washington Post* and other news outlets, there now appear to be discrepancies in Jackie’s account.”

In fact, *Rolling Stone* published an allegation about a brutal crime without any serious investigation or fact-gathering, on the say-so of one 20-year-old student.

Erdely, whose archive of articles at *Rolling Stone* is dominated by gender issues, clearly has a political ax to grind. A *Washington Post* article published November 28, which presented her as a hero of investigative journalism, explained about the origins of her *Rolling Stone* piece:

“Magazine writer Sabrina Rubin Erdely knew she wanted to write about sexual assaults at an elite university. What she didn’t know was which university.

“So, for six weeks starting in June, Erdely interviewed students from across the country. She talked to people at Harvard, Yale, Princeton and her alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania. *None of those schools felt quite right.* But one did: the University of Virginia, a public school, Southern and genteel, brimming with what Erdely calls ‘super-smart kids’ and steeped in the legacy of its founder, Thomas Jefferson.” [Emphasis added].

Putting aside diplomatic language, Erdely hunted around until she found the accuser and the story that confirmed her perspective—that a rape epidemic was sweeping college campuses—and once she found it, she was not going to be deterred by such things as corroborating facts.

Erdely was the author, but the article came into being, in the wider sense, in response to the needs of the identity politics forces for definite political ends.

The political agenda at work here originates at the top of the American state and saturates wider layers of the affluent petty bourgeoisie. It is not accidental that Erdely, in her November 19 article, approvingly called attention to the Obama administration’s having “stepped up pressure on colleges [including UVA], announcing Title IX investigations of 86 schools suspected of denying students their equal right to education by inadequately handling sexual-violence complaints.”

The White House is attempting to strengthen its hold on these selfish layers of the population for whom gender and race questions are paramount. It is also seeking to divert attention from its crimes overseas and the economic devastation at home. *Rolling*

*Stone*, along with the *Nation*, *Socialist Worker* and other liberal and pseudo-left outlets, is more than happy to oblige, stoking up hysteria about a “rape culture.”

And even the discrediting of Erdely’s article has not deterred the profoundly subjective and self-absorbed promoters of gender-based politics. Jessica Valenti in the *Guardian* flaunts her contempt for democratic principles and even elementary fairness, writing, “I choose to believe Jackie. I lose nothing by doing so, even if I’m later proven wrong—but at least I will still be able to sleep at night for having stood by a young woman who may have been through an awful trauma.”

So what if it all turns out to be a slander? What if the fraternity had been set on fire and someone had died, would Valenti still be able to sleep at night? *Rolling Stone*’s editors—and this is the approach, championed by figures such as Valenti, that predominates in these circles—started from the premise that any allegation of sexual misconduct is to be treated as true on its face. They write, in their semi-apology, “[W]e have come to the conclusion that we were mistaken in honoring Jackie’s request to not contact the alleged assaulters to get their account. In trying to be sensitive to the unfair shame and humiliation many women feel after a sexual assault, we made a judgment—the kind of judgment reporters and editors make every day.”

This is an astonishing admission. A major publication, with a readership of 1.4 million people, simply took one accuser’s (and one reporter’s) word for it!

“The truth,” the magazine’s editors now concede, “would have been better served by getting the other side of the story.”(!) Again, there is no innocent explanation, even stupidity or touching naïveté, for such a violation of journalistic ABCs. It was shaped and driven by the needs of ambitious petty-bourgeois layers, desperate for privileges and legitimization of those privileges.

The willingness to equate sexual misconduct allegations with proven facts is an increasing fact of life in America, as we noted recently in regard to Harvard’s new sexual harassment policy. It is profoundly anti-democratic and has sinister implications for political and social life. Presumption of innocence and due process are being tossed out the window.

The spirit of the McCarthyite anti-communist purges, and, for that matter, the Salem witch trials of the late 17th century, is being resurrected by elements passing themselves off as “left.”



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