



The Antagonists and Defenders of Paula Deen

Paula Deen has seen better days.

Over the last couple of weeks the celebrity chef has found herself at the center of a whirlwind of controversy after she stated in a deposition that she had employed the word “n****r” in her past. When asked if she had ever used it, the Southern Deen replied: “Yes, of course. But that’s just not a word that we use.” This remarkably successful Southern woman continued: “I don’t — I don’t know. As time has gone on things have changed since the 60s in the South.”



Deen also explained that the one time that she remembers having used this notorious racial epithet was when she sought to describe a black criminal who placed a gun to her head while he was robbing the bank at which she worked. The incident occurred about 30 years ago or so and it was during an emotionally charged conversation that Deen had with her husband that she supplied this description of her assailant. Of the latter, Deen said in her deposition, “I didn’t feel real favorable towards him.”

Earlier in June, a former employee of Deen’s, Lisa Jackson, filed a lawsuit against her. Jackson worked for Deen and Deen’s brother, Earl “Bubba” Hiers, in their jointly owned restaurant. Jackson alleges that Deen and Hiers engaged in racially and sexually discriminatory conduct. Jackson is white, but she has two nieces who are the children of a black father and claims that, because of this, she finds Deen’s racially oriented remarks offensive.

Deen as well admitted that she’s sure that she had used “the N word” at other times, but that she and her entire family object to using it in “any cruel or mean behavior.” She testified that while organizing her brother’s Southern plantation-themed wedding, she did indeed plan to hire blacks to portray slaves. Yet Deen denies that she used any racial epithets in reference to that event.

Because of all of this, the distinguished television personality and entrepreneur has been let go from her long-standing position at the Food Network. After her contract expires at the end of this month, the network stated, it will not renew it.

Matters are even worse for Deen, as several of her sponsors have abandoned her. Smithfield Foods, Walmart, Caesar’s Entertainment, Target, QVC, Home Depot, and Novo Nordisk are among those that have dissociated from her within recent days.

Some people, however, have been sympathetic. Interestingly, among their number are none other than Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, two well known figures who are no strangers to racial controversy.

When asked, Sharpton said that “a lot of us have in the past said things that we have regretted saying years ago.” He added: “You can’t deal with what it is fair till we see the outcome of the present circumstances she’s accused of.” What happened “20 years ago” or so is of no consequence to what’s the case today.

Jackson, to whom Deen reached out earlier in the week, insisted that she should not be “a sacrificial lamb” for racial bigotry and should be “reclaimed rather than destroyed” if she is truly contrite and



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willing to make amends.

On June 26, Deen appeared with Matt Lauer on the *Today Show*. The tearful Deen informed her detractors: "If you've never committed a sin, please pick up that rock, pick up that boulder, and hit me as hard as you can." She reiterated that it is only when she had a gun put to her head by a black gunman, a person, as it turned out, whom Deen had "gone on a limb" to help by getting him a loan, that she used the racially inflammatory language that has now come back to haunt her. "It's just not a part of who we are" to use it otherwise, Deen maintained.

Deen even went so far as to say that the very mention of "the N word" "makes my skin crawl." Referring to the presumably young blacks who work for her, she said: "It's very distressing for me to go into my kitchens and I hear what these young people are calling each other." She continued: "For this problem to be worked on ... these young people are gonna to have to take control and start showing respect for each other and not throwing that word at each other. It makes my skin crawl."

Lauer asked Deen if she was a racist. She responded: "No, no I am not. As a child, I was raised in a home that my father tolerated bad grades, maybe breaking a curfew, but he said, 'Girl, if I ever find out that you behaved in a way that is ... unkind ... your butt is gonna be mine.'"

Deen expressed resentment at the "very, very hurtful lies" spread about her. "People who have worked beside me, walked beside me, know what kind of person I am." Deen insists that she believes that "every creature on this Earth, every one of God's creatures, was equal. No matter who you choose to go to bed at night with, no matter what church you go to pray. Everybody should be treated equal. That's how I was raised."

There are, though, some people toward whom Deen has an adverse prejudice. "There's a couple kinds of people that I don't like, that I am prejudiced against ... and that's thieves and liars."

Deen's teary-eyed plea for mercy on the *Today Show* received mixed reviews.

David Johnson is the CEO of Strategic Vision, a public relations and branding agency located in Suwanee, Georgia. Deen "totally bombed," he said, and referred to her appearance as "the worst celebrity apology in history." Johnson characterized hers as "crocodile tears."

Mark Pasetky, CEO of the public relations firm Mark Allen and Co. remarked that Deen's "was really by far the most uncomfortable celebrity interview I have watched in a very long time. She really needed to take full responsibility for what she said, and it appeared to me that the strategy for this interview was to be pointing the fingers rather than to take responsibility."

On the other hand, people like Howard Bragman, the vice-chairman of Reputation.com, saw matters quite otherwise. "You couldn't watch this interview and not feel her pain," he asserted.

Bragman was not alone. Allen Adamson, the managing director of Landor Associates, a branding agency, stated that Deen "did a pretty credible job of delivering her message."

Donald Trump too had some encouraging words for Deen. The business mogul tweeted that while Deen "made a big mistake in using a forbidden word," still she "must be given some credit for admitting her mistake." He exclaimed: "She will be back!"

Interestingly, although Deen proved to be ratings gold for the *Today Show*, its host, Matt Lauer, elicited far more criticism for his treatment of Deen than Deen had received herself.

Nancy Powell may be just one viewer, but her take on Lauer represents that of legions of others: "Matt



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Lauer was rude and condescending in his interview with Paula Deen, not to mention he continued to interrupt and cut Paula off during the interview — he was on the attack — no wonder his popularity is dwindling down!”

Photo of Matt Lauer with Paula Deen



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