



# Prime Time and Misdemeanors: Investigating the 1950s TV Quiz Scandal A D.A.'s Account

*Joseph Stone, Tim Yohn*

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From 1955 to 1958, in the midst of television's most dynamic growth as an industry, big-money quiz shows with names like "The \$64,000 Question" and "Twenty-one" ruled prime time television. Some 50 million viewers watched as contestants—including celebrities like Charles Van Doren, Dr. Joyce Brothers, Patty Duke, and Xavier Cugat—returned week after week to roll up huge winnings on live broadcasts answering difficult questions that seemed to require unusual knowledge.

In the summer of 1958, a young actor came into the office of the Manhattan District Attorney to complain that a minor daytime quiz show called "Dotto" was fixed. Joseph Stone, an assistant district attorney and a specialist in commercial and consumer fraud, had never heard of anything like it and dismissed the complainant as a crank, until bits of the story appeared in a newspaper—and "Dotto" was taken off the air. This encouraged other whistle-blowers to go public with allegations concerning two prime-time quiz shows; within days, television was rocked by the greatest scandal in its history.

Prime Time and Misdemeanors is a complete, first-hand account of the TV quiz rigging affair, from Joseph Stone's unique perspective—through two grand jury probes directed by Stone, circus-like congressional hearings (highlighted by the confession of Charles Van Doren, the biggest celebrity created by the quiz shows), and the eventual prosecution of Van Doren and a score of others for perjury. Stone not only exposes the roles and motives of the creators, packagers, advertising agencies, sponsors, producers, and lawyers who participated in the cover-up during the investigation, he also unravels one of the great mysteries of the affair: Why did the individual contestants, who had done nothing illegal and had nothing to gain from such deception, perjure themselves?

This fascinating tale is drawn from Stone's memories, notes and records in his possession, and original research on many aspects of quiz show rigging which eluded scrutiny by the press and congressional investigators. It rescues from obscurity an affair which, in the shadow of the Iran-Contra affair, Watergate, and other great political scandals of subsequent decades, has been inaccurately viewed as a trivial episode in the self-absorbed, "innocent" era evoked by the popular concept of "the 1950s."

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