The most revealing fact about the Cornell case is not that a university fraternity allegedly became the setting for a horrifying sexual assault. It is that, after the alleged assault, nearly every institution that should have made the truth easier to establish instead made it harder: the fraternity culture, the university disciplinary process, campus police, the local prosecutor and, finally, the online public square.

That is why the case has provoked such fury. It is not merely a dispute over what happened during one night in October 2024. It is a test of what American institutions believe a woman must do, say and remember before they will take her allegation seriously.

The woman, identified in court documents as Jane Doe, alleges that seven Cornell fraternity members plied her with alcohol and ketamine and sexually assaulted her over several hours at a Chi Phi house. The men have not been criminally charged and have denied wrongdoing or disputed aspects of her account. Those facts matter. Due process matters. A civil complaint is not a conviction.

But due process cannot mean institutional passivity. Nor can uncertainty be manufactured by withholding evidence, reducing a detailed account to a shorter summary or treating a survivor’s confused behavior after trauma as proof that no assault occurred.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul has now appointed Attorney General Letitia James as special prosecutor. James says her office will review the evidence, interview witnesses and pursue prosecution if warranted. Cornell has agreed to an independent examination of how it handled the case. Those steps are necessary. They are also late.

The “red zone” is a warning

The first weeks of the American university year are commonly called the “red zone”: a period, generally stretching from the start of the fall semester into October or November, when social gatherings multiply and new students are especially vulnerable. Research has found that roughly half of campus sexual assaults occur during this period. RAINN reports that 16% of undergraduate women experience

nonconsensual sexual contact through physical force or inability to consent during their first year.

The phrase “red zone” can be useful because it forces universities to acknowledge a seasonal concentration of risk. But it can also be dangerously misleading. It makes sexual violence sound like a storm system, a temporary hazard that arrives with football, fraternity recruitment and Halloween parties before disappearing at Thanksgiving.

Sexual assault is not weather. It is behavior shaped by power, entitlement, alcohol and drug environments, peer approval, institutional incentives and the expectation—often correct—that consequences will be limited.

The red zone is therefore not simply a period when students need more safety tips. It is a period when universities need more accountability.

For decades, schools have responded to the problem with familiar instructions: travel in groups, monitor your drink, text a friend, avoid secluded rooms, do not accept drugs from strangers. Some of that advice may reduce risk. None of it answers the central question: Why are so many men still treating an incapacitated woman as an opportunity rather than a person whose consent is impossible?

A safety campaign that focuses primarily on women’s decisions quietly shifts responsibility toward potential victims. It implies that the assault might have been prevented if she had chosen a different party, a different drink, a different route home or a different friend. The Cornell allegations expose the moral failure of that framework. The relevant question is not why a young woman entered a fraternity house while intoxicated. It is what the men around her did when her ability to make decisions diminished.

The case’s disturbing institutional pattern

According to the lawsuit and reporting on the case, Doe initially described the encounter as beginning consensually. She says the situation later changed as alcohol and ketamine left her incapacitated. She told campus police, according to

her attorney and reporting by NPR, that she could say with complete confidence that she had been raped. Yet the local district attorney, Matthew Van Houten, said he did not receive or read the full interview and instead relied on a shorter written statement.

That discrepancy is not a minor administrative error. In a sexual-assault investigation, the difference between a full interview and a condensed summary can determine whether prosecutors understand the allegation at all.

Cornell has said its police department investigated the matter and that its internal process produced sanctions, including expulsions and suspensions. Reporting indicates that some students received lesser punishments, including essays, workshops or suspensions. The university closed the fraternity chapter and barred it from campus. Cornell has defended its response while agreeing to an outside review.

The question is not whether a university must automatically expel every accused student. It must not. The question is whether a university's process can be trusted when the alleged misconduct involves several members of a powerful social organization, a victim who was intoxicated and a culture in which group chats allegedly discussed her in dehumanizing sexual language.

A disciplinary process that treats an alleged assault as a public-relations problem will look for closure. A justice process looks for truth.

Those are not always the same thing.

The prosecutor's original decision illustrates another danger: the tendency to interpret a survivor's post-assault behavior as a definitive account of what occurred. Doe reportedly exchanged friendly messages with some of the men afterward, expressed concern about rumors and wrote that she had liked being with some of them. Critics have seized on those messages as if trauma produced a clean, linear narrative in which the victim immediately identifies the perpetrator, cuts off all contact and speaks in legally precise terms.

Real trauma is not so cooperative.

A survivor may minimize what happened, seek reassurance from the person who harmed her, preserve a relationship because it offers a sense of control or avoid naming the assault because doing so would make the event unbearable. She may distinguish between a consensual beginning and a nonconsensual continuation. She may not know how impaired she was. She may fear that friends will reject her, that authorities will blame her or that public disclosure will destroy her life.

None of this proves that an allegation is true. It does prove that post-assault behavior cannot be used as a shortcut around investigation.

Consent must remain meaningful

The Cornell case also exposes a legal problem. In New York, prosecutors have faced difficulty in cases where a person voluntarily consumes alcohol or drugs and later becomes unable to consent. The distinction between being drugged against one's will and becoming incapacitated after choosing to consume a substance can become decisive, even though the person's capacity at the moment of sexual activity may be the same.

That is a dangerous gap between common sense and legal interpretation.

Consent is not a permanent waiver signed at the beginning of a party. It is not preserved by the fact that someone chose to drink, accepted a substance or initially welcomed sexual contact. It must exist at the time of each sexual act and remain possible throughout the encounter.

A person who is unconscious, drifting in and out of consciousness or unable to make decisions cannot supply meaningful consent. The ethical rule should be simple: when someone is incapacitated, stop.

The law should be clear enough that juries and prosecutors can apply that principle without getting lost in whether the person voluntarily consumed the substance that caused the incapacity. A person may be responsible for choosing to drink; that does not give others permission to use her impaired condition for sex.

This is also why institutional policy must go further than criminal law. Criminal prosecution requires proof beyond a reasonable doubt. Universities use different standards and have different responsibilities. A school may not convict someone of a crime, but it can still determine that conduct violated its code, endangered another student or made continued membership in a fraternity incompatible with campus safety.

That distinction is essential. The absence of criminal charges is not a finding that nothing happened. And a university sanction is not a criminal conviction.

Greek life cannot be treated as untouchable

The public debate has understandably focused on fraternities. Greek organizations are not responsible for every assault on a college campus, and banning fraternities alone would not eliminate sexual violence. Cornell's own survey data show that reported nonconsensual sexual contact occurs in residence halls, off-campus residences and fraternity houses. In 2025, 35% of responding undergraduate women at Cornell reported experiencing nonconsensual sexual contact during their time at the university, up from 23% in 2023. The survey's response rate was low, so the figures require caution—but they remain impossible to dismiss.

The case for reform is not that every fraternity member is a predator. It is that fraternity structures can concentrate the conditions in which misconduct is concealed: male-controlled spaces, alcohol, social hierarchy, recruitment pressure, sexual competition and a strong incentive to protect the group.

Universities should not recognize or subsidize organizations that cannot meet basic safety standards. That means transparent event rules, sober monitors, independent reporting channels, cooperation with law enforcement, bans on coercive drug use, meaningful sanctions and consequences for members who obstruct investigations or retaliate against accusers.

A fraternity should not be allowed to behave like a private jurisdiction inside a university town.

Nor should universities outsource student safety to organizations whose first loyalty may be to their members. If a group's leaders know that an alleged assault occurred, their obligation cannot be merely to manage reputational damage. They must preserve evidence, ensure medical care, prevent retaliation and report relevant information through lawful channels.

The same principle applies to sororities, athletic teams, residence organizations and off-campus landlords. Sexual violence is not confined to one institution or one gendered social system. But institutions with concentrated power deserve concentrated scrutiny.

The online mob is not justice

The public reaction has brought real solidarity. Survivors have shared their own stories. Students have demanded accountability. Journalists and student newspapers have investigated when official institutions failed to explain themselves. That pressure has helped force an independent review and a reopened criminal investigation.

But solidarity can become another form of harm when it abandons due process or exposes a survivor to further danger.

The alleged victim has been targeted by attempts to uncover her identity. Commentators have threatened to publish her personal information. Her name has become a battlefield in a culture-war argument over feminism, masculinity and "cancel culture." This is cruel and strategically foolish.

A survivor is not public property simply because she filed a lawsuit. Her decision to seek accountability does not authorize strangers to expose her identity, circulate intimate details or turn her trauma into content.

The accused men also have legal rights. They have not been convicted. Public anger cannot substitute for evidence, and social media cannot substitute for a trial. Naming defendants in court documents is not the same as declaring them guilty; publishing accusations as settled fact is.

The strongest response is not to imitate the failures of the institutions under scrutiny. It is to demand better institutions: investigators who read the full record, prosecutors who interview key witnesses, universities that explain their procedures, journalists who protect survivors and courts that test evidence fairly.

What universities should do now

The red zone requires more than posters and orientation speeches. Universities should implement a specific, measurable safety agenda:

- Require trained, independent investigators for allegations involving fraternity houses, athletic teams or senior student leaders.
- Send complete investigative records—not summaries shaped by institutional convenience—to prosecutors when a possible crime is reported.
- Establish a single, clearly publicized reporting pathway that does not require survivors to navigate campus police, administrators and student organizations separately.
- Preserve digital evidence immediately, including group chats, social-media posts, access logs and security footage.
- Provide confidential medical, mental-health and legal support without conditioning help on filing a formal complaint.
- Prohibit retaliation and investigate online threats, doxxing and intimidation as separate misconduct.
- Publish anonymized data about allegations, sanctions, appeals and repeat findings.
- Make recognition of fraternities conditional on compliance with independent safety audits.
- Train students—especially men—about incapacitation, affirmative consent and the obligation to intervene.
- Review cases after the fact, not merely to defend the university but to identify where its procedures failed.

The most important reform may be cultural: stop asking whether the woman behaved perfectly. No victim has to be prudent, sober, consistent, likable or immediately articulate to deserve a serious investigation.

The standard we should demand

The Cornell case is still an allegation under criminal investigation and civil litigation. The public should not prejudge the ultimate legal outcome. But the institutional questions are already visible.

Did investigators preserve and transmit the complete account? Did prosecutors examine all relevant evidence? Did Cornell's sanctions reflect the seriousness of the alleged conduct? Did fraternity members understand that incapacity ends consent? Did officials protect the complainant from retaliation? Did the university place institutional reputation above transparency?

Those questions do not depend on a jury's eventual verdict.

The phrase "red zone" should therefore be reclaimed. It should not mean six to ten weeks when women are told to be careful while men are given the benefit of the doubt. It should mean six to ten weeks when universities are watched most closely, fraternities are held to the highest standards and every student understands that intoxication is not permission.

The real danger is not only the party. It is the system that turns a vulnerable person into a problem to be managed.

Until that system changes, the red zone will return every autumn—not because assault is inevitable, but because too many institutions continue to make accountability optional.