

# Bennett Says His Gambling Days are Over

Exposed as a high roller in Nevada and New Jersey casinos, conservative moralist William Bennett said Monday he has gambled too much and that his gambling days are behind him.

“A number of stories in the media have reported that I have engaged in high stakes gambling over the past decade,” Bennett said in a [statement](#). “It is true that I have gambled large sums of money. I have also complied with all laws on reporting wins and losses.

“Nevertheless, I have done too much gambling, and this is not an example I wish to set. Therefore, my gambling days are over.”

Bennett, author of *The Book of Virtues* and other books decrying moral decline in America, didn't disclose how much he has won or lost while gambling. Media reports indicate he may have lost as much as \$8 million over the last decade, mostly to slot machines and video poker. Bennett has said casino records don't accurately report winnings and losses, and he estimated he had about broken even during the last 10 years.

Reports of Bennett's gambling disturbed some of his leading allies on the religious right.

Focus on the Family founder and chairman James Dobson issued a statement expressing disappointment that his longtime friend “is dealing with what appears to be a gambling addiction.”

Focus on the Family promotes several of Bennett's titles, while opposing gambling in any form.

“One of the reasons Focus on the Family continues to be strongly opposed to any

form of gambling is because it has the power to ensnare and wound not only its victims, but also those closest to them,” Dobson said. “‘Gaming,’ as the industry euphemistically refers to itself, is a cancer on the soul of the nation.”

Family Research Council President Ken Connor described Bennett’s fondness for high-stakes gambling as “disappointing” while criticizing “gloating pundits” who “have pounced on the story to accuse Mr. Bennett of being a moralizing hypocrite.”

“As the nation’s leading critic of America’s virtue deficit, Mr. Bennett, like it or not, bears a greater burden regarding his personal conduct than the average citizen. The same is no less true for all of us who promote virtue in the public square,” Connor said in a statement.

Connor said Bennett has “simply shown himself to have feet of clay” and commended him for his statement about intending to give up gambling.

Bennett’s defenders in secular media doubted there would be much fallout over the controversy.

“I mean, I don’t understand. All this moralizing going on,” National Public Radio’s Juan Williams said on “Fox News Sunday.”

“The idea is, Bill Bennett is a hypocrite, he was attacking Clinton on moral issues, and all that. Look, Bill Bennett’s not hurting his family, his wife. In fact, he’s a stand-up guy in this town, working for a lot of charities,” he said.

“The gambling—you know what, gambling is his business, as long as he’s not stealing from the till, in my opinion.”

But it’s too early to tell how much it will tarnish his image among religious conservatives, where for some he is akin to a cult hero.

Bennett’s faith tradition, the Roman Catholic Church, doesn’t view gambling as inherently sinful. “I’ve gambled all my life, and it’s never been a moral issue with me,” Bennett has been quoted as saying. “I liked church bingo when I was

growing up.”

Many of his staunch supporters in evangelical circles feel differently, however.

The Southern Baptist Convention has adopted numerous resolutions against gambling over the years. The most recent, in [1997](#), called on “all Christians to exercise their influence by refusing to participate in any form of gambling or its promotion” and for political leaders to “enact laws restricting and eventually eliminating all forms of gambling and its advertisement.”

Baptist state conventions in Tennessee, Alabama and elsewhere have recently banded with other denominations to oppose gambling initiatives in their states.

The American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., general board also passed a [resolution](#) against gambling in 1996.

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, predicted the revelations would undermine Bennett’s credibility among those who view gambling as a vice. “Protestants and conservative evangelicals, who overwhelmingly see gambling as a moral issue, will say that Bennett betrayed the very moral habits about which he wrote in *The Book of Virtues*,” Parham said Monday.

Baptist Press didn’t carry a story Monday about the controversy. The Southern Baptist Convention news service had in recent months mentioned Bennett favorably in stories about international religious freedom, AIDS prevention, Christian schools, human cloning and criticism of Sen. Trent Lott for racial insensitivity.

Bennett served under two Republican presidents and was a leading critic of President Clinton’s adultery.

Bob Novak, on CNN’s Crossfire, called articles about Bennett’s gambling an “attack by the left wing Washington Monthly on one of the person who is very, very respected by the young people of America. So what if he gambles?”

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Co-host James Carville responded with: “So wait-a \$1,000 pull on the slot machine? I mean, come on, man. I mean you’re telling me that’s like the guy don’t have a problem? Woo!”

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