

Bennett's Gambling Prompts Discussion on Morality

Arguably America's most partisan moral crusader has tarnished his much-honed public image as the master of virtue and pundit of cultural decline.

William Bennett, who rode to fame and wealth as author of "The Book of Virtues," was exposed over the weekend as a compulsive and secretive gambler at casinos in Las Vegas and Atlantic City, who had lost more than \$8 million in the last decade.

At first, Bennett downplayed his problem with a series of dismissive arguments to the two online publications, [The Washington Monthly](#) and [Newsweek](#), which reported the story. Bennett said he didn't play "the milk money," meaning he wasn't harming his family's financial security.

He appealed to his personal virtuousness, saying he gave "a chunk" of his winnings to charity. He also said he learned to gamble as a child with church bingo, implying that if gambling took place in church it must not be a sin.

On Sunday, his wife defended him. "He's not addicted to it," Elayne Bennett said, adding, "He's never going again."

On Monday, after the story spread across the nation and made the Sunday news talk shows, Bennett admitted, "It is true that I have gambled large sums of money."

"I have done too much gambling, and this is not an example I wish to set," he said. "Therefore, my gambling days are over."

Bennett's statement was designed to short circuit a damaging public relations problem and stopped short of admitting moral failure or acknowledging that gambling is a destructive vice.

In a whirlwind of news articles and commentaries, Bennett's political and religious allies reacted in four ways.

One reaction was stony silence. Jerry Falwell, the founder of the Moral Majority, refused to criticize Bennett. Falwell said, "I am sure he doesn't need a sermon from Jerry Falwell." Always quick to pounce on the failures of their enemies, the Southern Baptist Convention leaders offered a thundering silence about one of their icons.

Another reaction was disappointment. James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, said, he was "disappointed to learn that our longtime friend, Dr. Bill Bennett, is dealing with what appears to be a gambling addiction."

A third reaction was denial of moral failure. Some said that Bennett did nothing wrong. It wasn't illegal. It was personal and caused no harm. It was not hypocritical because he never condemned gambling in others. For example, William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, referred to the situation "as a rather minor and pardonable vice and a legal one that has not damaged him or anyone else."

A fourth reaction was deflection. The extreme right nodded at the report and then attacked the Clintons, as did Newsmax.com. Saying that he was disappointed, Ken Conner, president of the Family Research Council, pointed a finger at the casino industry for leaking information about Bennett.

What was missing from Bennett's friends was the cry of moral outrage. When a moderate or liberal figure stumbles, Bennett and his cronies scream their outrage. A double standard clearly exists among the religious and cultural right-wingers when it comes to critiquing one of their own.

The same could also be said about the religious and secular left. Some were publicly silent, albeit privately angry, about Clinton's sinful behavior with an intern. Others refused to criticize the Clinton administration when it mistakenly bombed an alleged Osama bin Laden chemical weapons factory in Khartoum,

which actually made aspirin.

The point here is not that two wrongs make a right. The failure of the left does not justify the failure of the right, and vice versa.

Instead, Bennett's unveiling is a painful reminder that most individuals and entities have their own list of virtues and vices. Bennett always rushed to condemn the vices of others, while he ignored his own.

As the nation's drug czar, Bennett was quick to attack illegal drugs, which are a significant destructive force in our society. But he was reticent about the nation's two leading weapons of mass destruction—tobacco and alcohol. The fact that Bennett at one time smoked two packs a day surely affected his attitude.

Bennett's gambling habit also should force a public discussion about the morality of gambling.

When Bennett said that gambling has "never been a moral issue with me," he advanced the agenda of the gambling industry, which has for years worked to pitch gambling as a game and not a problem. The industry refers to their activity as "gaming," making it sound like a benign sport rather than a destructive vice.

Gambling is anything but a harmless activity. Its ties to crime are well-documented. Its contribution to prostitution, substance abuse, divorce, financial ruin and family conflict are well-known. Its promise of easy riches fuels greed, one of the seven deadly sins.

Gambling has also become a way for government to evade its fiscal responsibility. Rather than create fairer tax structures, states promise revenue through lotteries, slot machines and other devices, knowing full-well that those who suffer the most will be the poor.

Gambling is a moral issue, as well as a political, economic and health issue. Evading the seriousness of this problem only compounds it.

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