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The Bookie of Virtue

William J. Bennett has made millions lecturing people on morality--and blown it on gambling.

By **Joshua Green**

"We should know that too much of anything, even a good thing, may prove to be our undoing...[We] need ... to set definite boundaries on our appetites."

--*The Book of Virtues*, by William J. Bennett

No person can be more rightly credited with making morality and personal responsibility an integral part of the political debate than William J. Bennett. For more than 20 years, as a writer, speaker, government official, and political operative, Bennett has been a commanding general in the culture wars. As Ronald Reagan's chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, he was the scourge of academic permissiveness. Later, as Reagan's secretary of education, he excoriated schools and students for failing to set and meet high standards. As drug czar under George H.W. Bush, he applied a get-tough approach to drug use, arguing that individuals have a moral responsibility to own up to their addiction. Upon leaving public office, Bennett wrote *The Book of Virtues*, a compendium of parables snatched up by millions of parents and teachers across the political spectrum. Bennett's crusading ideals have been adopted by politicians of both parties, and implemented in such programs as character education classes in public schools--a testament to his impact.

But Bennett, a devout Catholic, has always been more Old Testament than New. Even many who sympathize with his concerns find his combative style haughty and unforgiving. Democrats in particular object to his partisan sermonizing, which portrays liberals as inherently less moral than conservatives, more given to excusing personal weaknesses, and unwilling to confront the vices that destroy families. During the impeachment of Bill Clinton, Bennett was among the president's most unrelenting detractors. His book, *The Death of Outrage*, decried, among other things, the public's failure to take Clinton's sins more seriously.

His relentless effort to push

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Americans to do good has enabled Bennett to do extremely well. His best-selling *The Book of Virtues* spawned an entire cottage industry, from children's books to merchandizing tie-ins to a PBS cartoon series. Bennett commands \$50,000 per appearance on the lecture circuit and has received hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants from such conservative benefactors as the Scaife and John M. Olin foundations.

Few vices have escaped Bennett's withering scorn. He has opined on everything from drinking to "homosexual unions" to "The Ricki Lake Show" to wife-swapping. There is one, however, that has largely escaped Bennett's wrath: gambling. This is a notable omission, since on this issue morality and public policy are deeply intertwined. During Bennett's years as a public figure, casinos, once restricted to Nevada and New Jersey, have expanded to 28 states, and the number continues to grow. In Maryland, where Bennett lives, the newly elected Republican governor Robert Ehrlich is trying to introduce slot machines to fill revenue shortfalls. As gambling spreads, so do its associated problems. Heavy gambling, like drug use, can lead to divorce, domestic violence, child abuse, and bankruptcy. According to a 1998 study commissioned by the National Gambling Impact Study Commission, residents within 50 miles of a casino are twice as likely to be classified as "problem" or "pathological" gamblers than those who live further away.

If Bennett hasn't spoken out more forcefully on an issue that would seem tailor-made for him, perhaps it's because he is himself a heavy gambler. Indeed, in recent weeks word has circulated among Washington conservatives that his wagering could be a real problem. They have reason for concern. *The Washington Monthly* and [Newsweek](#) have learned that over the last decade Bennett has made dozens of trips to casinos in Atlantic City and Las Vegas, where he is a "preferred customer" at several of them, and sources and documents provided to *The Washington Monthly* put his total losses at more than \$8 million.

"I don't play the 'milk money.'"

Bennett has been a high-roller since at least the early 1990s. A review of one 18-month stretch of gambling showed him visiting casinos, often for two or three days at a time (and enjoying a line of credit of at least \$200,000 at several of them). Bennett likes to be discreet. "He'll usually call a host and let us know when he's coming," says one source. "We can limo him in. He prefers the high-limit room, where he's less likely to be seen and where he can play the \$500-a-pull slots. He usually plays very late at night or early in the morning--usually between midnight and 6 a.m." The documents show that in one two-month period, Bennett wired more than \$1.4 million to cover losses. His desire for privacy is evident in his customer profile at one casino, which lists as his residence the address for Empower.org (the Web site of Empower America, the non-profit group Bennett co-chairs). Typed across the form are the words: "NO CONTACT AT RES OR BIZ!!!"

Bennett's gambling has not totally escaped public notice. In 1998, *The Washington Times* reported in a light-hearted front-page feature story that he plays low-stakes poker with a group of prominent conservatives, including Robert Bork, Supreme

Court Justice Antonin Scalia, and Chief Justice William Rehnquist. A year later, the same paper reported that Bennett had been spotted at the new Mirage Resorts Bellagio casino in Las Vegas, where he was reputed to have won a \$200,000 jackpot. Bennett admitted to the *Times* that he had visited the casino, but denied winning \$200,000. Documents show that, in fact, he won a \$25,000 jackpot on that visit--but left the casino down \$625,000.

Bennett--who gambled throughout Clinton's impeachment--has continued this pattern in subsequent years. On July 12 of last year, for instance, Bennett lost \$340,000 at Caesar's Boardwalk Regency in Atlantic City. And just three weeks ago, on March 29 and 30*, he lost more than \$500,000 at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. "There's a term in the trade for this kind of gambler," says a casino source who has witnessed Bennett at the high-limit slots in the wee hours. "We call them losers."

Asked by *Newsweek* columnist and *Washington Monthly* contributing editor Jonathan Alter to comment on the reports, Bennett admitted that he gambles but not that he has ended up behind. "I play fairly high stakes. I adhere to the law. I don't play the 'milk money.' I don't put my family at risk, and I don't owe anyone anything." The documents offer no reason to contradict Bennett on these points. Bennett claims he's beaten the odds: "Over 10 years, I'd say I've come out pretty close to even."

"You can roll up and down a lot in one day, as we have on many occasions," Bennett explains. "You may cycle several hundred thousand dollars in an evening and net out only a few thousand."

"I've made a lot of money [in book sales, speaking fees and other business ventures] and I've won a lot of money," adds Bennett. "When I win, I usually give at least a chunk of it away [to charity]. I report everything to the IRS."

But the documents show only a few occasions when he turns in chips worth \$30,000 or \$40,000 at the end of an evening. Most of the time, he draws down his line of credit, often substantially. A casino source, hearing of Bennett's claim to breaking even on slots over 10 years, just laughed.

"You don't see what I walk away with," Bennett says. "They [casinos] don't want you to see it."

Explaining his approach, Bennett says: "I've been a 'machine person' [slot machines and video poker]. When I go to the tables, people talk--and they want to talk about politics. I don't want that. I do this for three hours to relax." He says he was in Las Vegas in April for dinner with the former governor of Nevada and gambled while he was there.

Bennett says he has made no secret of his gambling. "I've gambled all my life and it's never been a moral issue with me. I liked church bingo when I was growing up. I've been a poker player."

But while Bennett's poker

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playing and occasional Vegas jaunt are known to some Washington conservatives, his high-stakes habit comes as a surprise to many friends. "We knew he went out there [to Las Vegas] sometimes, but at that level? Wow!" said one longtime associate of Bennett.

Despite his personal appetites, Bennett and his organization, Empower America, oppose the extension of casino gambling in the states. In a recent editorial, his Empower America co-chair Jack Kemp inveighed against lawmakers who "pollute our society with a slot machine on every corner." The group recently published an *Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*, with an introduction written by Bennett, that reports 5.5 million American adults as "problem" or "pathological" gamblers. Bennett says he is neither because his habit does not disrupt his family life.

When reminded of studies that link heavy gambling to divorce, bankruptcy, domestic abuse, and other family problems he has widely decried, Bennett compared the situation to alcohol.

"I view it as drinking," Bennett says. "If you can't handle it, don't do it."

Bennett is a wealthy man and may be able to handle losses of hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. Of course, as the nation's leading spokesman on virtue and personal responsibility, Bennett's gambling complicates his public role. Moreover, it has already exacted a cost. Like him or hate him, William Bennett is one of the few public figures with a proven ability to influence public policy by speaking out. By furtively indulging in a costly vice that destroys millions of lives and families across the nation, Bennett has profoundly undermined the credibility of his word on this moral issue.

Reporting assistance provided by Robert W. J. Fisk, Soyoung Ho, and Brent Kendall.

* misstated in original version as April 5 and 6

Joshua Green is an editor of *The Washington Monthly*.

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