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### Bill Bennett's Gambling "Problem"

The author of "The Book of Virtues" is a high roller. Does it matter? Should we care?

by Jonathan V. Last

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FIRST THINGS FIRST: I don't know Bill Bennett, I've never even met him, and I don't have any interest in his rise or fall.

That said, what's happening to him tonight is silly.

The Internet is blazing with the news that Bennett, a conservative and author of "The Book of Virtues," among other titles, gambles (read the two stories in Newsweek and the Washington Monthly [here](#) and [here](#)). And he doesn't just gamble a little, he gambles a lot.



Jonathan V. Last, online editor

Certain commentators are shocked--shocked!--at this breathtaking scoop. The American Prospect's anonymously written blog, Tapped, says, "Don't miss Josh Green's breathtaking scoop--co-broken with Newsweek's Jonathan Alter--about virtuecrat Bill Bennett's not-so-little gambling problem. One wants to feel sorry for Bennett, who's seems like he's got an addiction. But he's never cut anyone else any slack for their failings, so why should he get any? Amazing--it's always the ones who bluster the most."

The equally respectable anonymously-written blog MediaWhores Online has a huge [banner headline](#) reading "THE \$8 MILLION MAN: WILLIAM BENNETT EXPOSED AS GOP GREED, GLUTTONY CZAR: WASHINGTON MONTHLY PUTS COMPULSIVE GAMBLER'S LOSSES IN THE MILLIONS!"

Expect the mainstream press to jump on this tomorrow and similar guffawing and sniggering from Maureen Dowd, Bob Herbert, et al. to follow by no later than Tuesday morning.

I don't understand what the big deal is. The news that Bennett gambles big-time isn't new. In 1996 Margaret Carlson reported that Bennett won \$60,000 in a single outing in Las Vegas. Of course being old news wouldn't matter if it was a serious charge. But legal gambling is, well, legal.

One is tempted to argue that Bennett's gambling is a legal, common, private activity. But that shouldn't necessarily protect him. If Bennett was cheating on his wife (which is also legal, common, and private) it would be a serious charge, but that's because it involves the breaking of trust and willingness to hurt others. On the scale of legal, common, private activities, gambling is much closer to smoking than adultery. Would the world shudder if it turned out

that Bennett was a two-pack-a-day man?

So what's going on here? Two reporters came upon an interesting story about a rich guy who gambles a lot. (By the way, unless we know Bennett's worth and income, it's impossible to judge just how big he was gambling. These stories put his total losses at \$8 million, but it's unclear as to whether or not those are *net* losses. For a sense of scale, the Washington Post's Michael Leahy reported that during a typical night out with Michael Jordan, the basketball great went down \$500,000 and then finished up \$600,000 at the blackjack table. Remember, that's in a single night.)

But my sense is that the left is going to use Bennett's gambling to try to drive him out of public life. Why? Hypocrisy, of course. Never mind that Bennett seems to have mentioned gambling only in passing here and there. He certainly hasn't made a career out of condemning gambling. And on the other side of the coin, he's never flacked for the gaming industry. And besides all that, in his books on morality and virtue (at least the ones I've read) Bennett doesn't hold *himself* up as the model of goodness and truth.

Nevertheless, the Washington Monthly, which has the beefier version of the story, seems bent on clubbing Bennett with the hypocrisy stick. But while they're castigating Bennett for gambling today, they were staunch defenders of sin-magnet Bill Clinton just a few years back.

In the cover story for the October 1998 issue of the Washington monthly, "Sex, Lies, & Presidents: Bill Clinton's not the first president to shade the truth," Rick Shenkman wrote:

*Every generation draws lessons about the world from the events it experiences. The generation that appeased Hitler at Munich concluded that unchecked aggression leads to war. Our generation--particularly the media elites--learned that a lie told by a government official is never just a lie; it is a sign of deep, profound corruption.*

*But it may be time to rethink the lesson of Vietnam and Watergate as we once had to rethink the lesson of Munich. If we find a man likable and approve of the job he's doing, then perhaps we should overlook his lies. Certainly, it's doubtful we should impeach him.*

In that same issue Charles Peters asked "How can anyone be serious about impeaching a president for a sin that is not related to his public duties?"

And on the subject of Clinton's perjury, Peters was even more dismissive:

*Men who commit adultery lie to protect the feelings of their wives and to protect themselves from the anger of their wives. They often ask friends to lie for them. The Washington media community is full of people who have done this but now seem unable to forgive Bill Clinton. For me, his Flowers-Jones-Lewinsky-related sins are not nearly as important as his good deeds as president . . .*

See? Adultery, perjury, whatever. But how about the very credible charge of sexual assault that was levied against the former president? The Washington Monthly--which spent 1,600 words on Bennett's gambling and put 4 reporters on the story--has mentioned Juanita Broaddrick's name only twice (spelling her name wrong both times). The first was in the April 1999 issue where Susan Threadgill reported:

*Juanita Broadrick, just three weeks after her alleged rape by Bill Clinton in 1978, attended a Clinton fundraiser with her husband. In 1979 she accepted an advisory committee appointment by him. In 1984 she wrote Clinton a congratulatory letter, appending a handwritten note, "I admire you very much" Our friends tell us this is just like what Anita Hill did following Clarence Thomas' advances. Hmmm. Isn't rape considerably less forgivable and forgettable than talking about pubic hair?*

One month later, Threadgill mentioned Broaddrick again:

*Oops. We were dead wrong when we reported last month that Juanita Broderick had written Bill Clinton "I admire you very much." It was he who had written those words to her, a fact that alters the significance more than a little bit.*

How big of her.

Is Bill Bennett's gambling a legitimate story? Sure. Although if I was the editor I would have played it in Newsweek's Periscope section, not as a 930 word exclusive "scoop." It will probably cause Bennett some embarrassment. The rest of the hyperventilation should stop now.

*Jonathan V. Last is online editor of The Weekly Standard.*

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