



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Leave Bill Bennett Alone

by Scott McPherson

Public revelations of former drug czar William J. Bennett's penchant for high-stakes gambling has produced immediate reform for the *Book of Virtues* author: "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. Therefore, my gambling days are over."

It is very tempting — and it would be very easy — to bash Bill Bennett mercilessly for being a hypocrite. After all, he has built a career of national prominence on his alleged moral stature and on his great pontifications on the necessity of virtuous behavior, even while losing \$8 million in the last 10 years to satisfy his craving to gamble.

It is also tempting to skewer Bennett's many allies on the political right who are either flocking to his defense or remaining curiously silent about this issue. Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority and an outspoken religious conservative who often spared no ink in attacking Bill Clinton's moral transgressions, told the *Washington Times* that he was "not going to respond" to the revelations about Bennett. Rep. Frank Wolf, a Virginia Republican described by the *Times* as "one of the staunchest opponents of legalized gambling," also "declined to comment on Mr. Bennett."

Taking a much more committed approach, the conservative Concerned Women for America said that it "commends our friend Bill Bennett's bold move to cease gambling" and praised him for "taking responsibility for his example to others" and demonstrating "good character." No comment was made on the decade he spent doing exactly the opposite.

In fact, many of those who would be expected to trash Bill Bennett are instead offering their most profound sympathies. CWA's statement recognized that "families are crumbling under the weight of irresponsible gambling losses" and promised to "pray that Mr. Bennett [would] remain firm in his resolve to eliminate gambling from his life." James Dobson of the Colorado-based Focus on the Family said he was "disappointed to learn that our long-time friend ... is

dealing with what appears to be a gambling addiction.” He called gambling “a cancer on the soul of the nation” and offered his own prayers for Bennett “and his family in the days ahead.”

Far from making excuses, Bill Bennett is taking his problem by the horns. And far from acting as his apologists, these prominent conservatives are actually doing the right thing in standing by him. If the man is truly making a life-changing transition away from a bad habit, he needs all the help he can get.

Addictions and other vices are often very destructive to human beings, and the negative consequences of those actions can often be felt far beyond the individual involved; families, friends, even entire neighborhoods and communities can feel the ripple effect from one person’s poor behavior. Now more than ever, Bennett needs the support and care of the important people in his life. Addiction and vice are best handled with love, compassion, and dedication, not harsh criticism and condemnation.

Fortunately, a little public embarrassment is the most Bennett has to concern himself with. It could be much worse — he could also have to worry about facing a prison sentence for his particular vice. This won’t happen, however, because our society has advanced to a degree where the overwhelming majority of people understand the utter absurdity of hauling a man like Bill Bennett, a good and caring husband and father, off to jail, tearing him away from his profession and family, just for gambling.

Yet, ironically, that is precisely the solution sought by Bennett and most other conservatives for dealing with certain other “decadent” activities of which they disapprove. Bennett is, after all, the same man who told an ABC News Special that “people [who use drugs] should be imprisoned for long periods of time.... It’s a matter of right and wrong.”

But gambling addiction, by Bennett’s own admission, is also “wrong,” which is why he should be thankful that he is not being held to the draconian and intolerant standards that he applies to drug addiction.

In America, our hearts go out to addicted gamblers, alcoholics, overeaters, and smokers, and the entire spectrum of our creative and supportive society is tapped to address these ailments. Twelve-step programs; counseling; advertisements; addiction-battling products such as antabuse and the nicotine patch; antidepressants; social pressure; and intervention by church, friends, and family are all employed to try to persuade those involved in potentially destructive activities to abandon their old ways and embrace a better way of life.

Meanwhile, certain other practices have been singled out for legal persecution. These are not acts that in and of themselves entail a violation of other people’s rights, such as murder, rape,

and theft. They are not violent acts or fraudulent acts, but instead acts that betray, at worst, a lack of character and moral direction in the person.

The “perpetrators” aren’t “bad” people; they are sick people, and they deserve just as much sympathy as our former drug czar. Still, for drug users and “vice” offenders, we send out squads of armed men, backed up by the full force of federal, state, and local governments, to administer “justice” to them.

Bill Bennett should be admired for coming to grips with his own failings and seeking to make the necessary changes in his life. He didn’t need a SWAT team splintering through his front door, the charges of a prosecuting attorney, or the sentence of a judge. Instead, he eventually saw the damage he was causing to his family and himself, and he is voluntarily taking steps to conquer his problem.

It must be emphasized, though, that this wasn’t always the case. It took many years for Bennett to see the error of his ways, and worse still, he might possibly never have done so. But in order to have a free society, we sometimes have to watch people make mistakes and leave them alone to take the consequences.

Most Americans understand this valuable principle when it comes to the more politically acceptable forms of aberrant behavior. It’s time to start treating *all* such moral lapses with the same caring, compassion, sympathy, and respect that Bill Bennett’s friends and family would like to see extended to him.

Let’s leave Bill Bennett in peace — and while we’re at it, let’s extend that courtesy to all the other people who find themselves in similar positions.

Scott McPherson is a policy advisor at The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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