
Good Sense and Good Politics

William J. Bennett

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It’s great to be in Minnesota. You know the definition of Minnesota: Wisconsin without the conservatives—present company excluded. It is a special pleasure to be invited back to address Center of the American Experiment again, though the nature of the call was a little different this time. In 1991, it was, “Mr. Secretary, please come. It is important that someone of your stature, someone who has been in the cabinet, give our

kick-off address.” This time, it was, “We’ve had Lady Thatcher, we’ve had General Powell, and we are willing to give you a second chance.”

Congratulations on your success.

There is a group here from Minnesota Best Friends, a program that advocates abstinence from sex, drugs, and alcohol, which my wife started for girls in the public schools. As one of the girls who started in Elayne’s first

class, a sixth grader, put it recently on television when she was being pressed by an interviewer about whether such a program could be effective, “Abstinence works every time it is tried.”

I understand that Best Friends has gotten some bad press in Minneapolis, that it was called fear-based and shame-based. It is actually very positive. If you saw it in operation, you would see very happy young women.

That said, people ought to be capable of being ashamed from time to time. We would have better leadership if that were the case. The capacity to be ashamed follows from the recognition that one has done a grievous wrong.

And fear: Plato said courage has to do with fear. Courage doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t be afraid. Courage is knowing what to fear and what not to fear. It is important to be afraid of the right things. For many children growing up in America today, a healthy dose of fear about some things would be good.

Some worry, too. I was listening to one of the television-show psychoanalysts telling people not to worry. It is not a bad thing to worry. One shouldn’t be riven with worry, but worry is good if you worry about the right things. Saint Monica worried her son Augustine into sainthood. When I said “Saint Monica” recently, I heard gasps from the audience. There actually was someone named Saint Monica. She was Saint Augustine’s mother; I will leave the rest for you to discover.

Since we aren’t going to have questions at the end of this program, I will answer the questions that you may be

thinking. Yes, I’m related to the president’s lawyer—he’s my brother. How did this happen? Check Genesis, Book I. (He says the same thing to his audiences, so it is perfectly all right for me to say this.)

My brother and I recently had a debate in Richmond moderated by Tim Russert, who asked Bobby, “What is the unkindest thing your brother ever said?” I was surprised by my brother’s answer, because I have said a couple of things that were perhaps unkind. He has said several about me, too, but the one that he took offense at, I didn’t really mean: someone asked me early in the program what I thought my brother’s real view of the Clinton scandal is, and I said, “Well, he doesn’t have a real view. He is a lawyer.” But, alas, so am I.

Kids and Calculus

I came to Washington when Ronald Reagan asked me to be chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. It took a year for me to get the job. They told President Reagan he had to have a professor of philosophy, history, or literature, and so they began a nationwide search to find a humanities professor who had voted for Ronald Reagan. There were three of us. I was a professor of philosophy, and I got the job.

It was a fine job, except that I had to wear black tie almost every night. There was lots of white wine, lots of brie, lots of French, and so on—the sort of the thing you would expect in a humanities job. I was in that job for three years, and then I became secretary of education. President Reagan said to me, “I can’t get rid of this

department, but maybe we can make some sense out of it. Maybe you could talk about what parents are concerned about, and about things like standards." It was a deal.

My wife, a former elementary school and special education teacher, gave me the most important advice I got. She said, "Don't just make pronouncements. Go find out what you are talking about first."

"Why should I be any different from anybody else in this town?" I said.

"Because you are a teacher. You are the secretary of education. Go do your homework."

So I did my homework, and I went to 110 schools and taught fourth, seventh, and eleventh grade and found out about American education by talking to parents, kids, teachers, principals, and school board members. It was a lot of fun. I went to some universities, too, on the rare occasions when I was invited.

In America's classrooms, I saw terrible things that made my knuckles go white, and I saw things that were inspirations to me. I saw Jaime Escalante, the greatest teacher I've ever seen in my life, in Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, teaching barrio kids calculus and making Garfield the number three high school in the country in terms of students getting advanced placement in calculus. When he got there three years earlier, he was told that the kids there weren't interested in anything but getting girls pregnant, getting into fights, and taking drugs.

"I want to teach them calculus," he said.

"You can't teach them calculus,"

they said. "It will be bad for them. It will be dangerous for them."

"Dangerous for them?" he asked. "Why dangerous?"

"They will fail at this as they have failed at everything else, and it will lower their self-esteem."

"I've only been in America three years," Mr. Escalante replied, "but it seems to me if you are sixteen and growing up Latino in Los Angeles, there are a lot of things that are dangerous to you, but calculus is not one of them."

I asked Ronald Reagan if I could bring my heroes to Washington for lunch at the White House, and he said sure. We brought some teachers, some principals, and a few students. Jaime Escalante sat next to President Reagan, and they talked and talked. The president loved Escalante and vice versa.

Before Escalante came, he called me and asked if it would be all right for him to bring a present for the president. I told him yes, and he brought the president a copy of the calculus book he used with his students.

Two days after this great visit, I got a call from the president: "Bill, that Escalante is a wonderful fellow and he left me this book. The next time you are around, if you could just come by, I want to get your advice on something."

"What is it, sir?"

"Well, I'm reading it, and I'm not sure I'm holding it right side up."

That's playfulness in the job. Not playing while on the job—there is a distinction.

About six months into my tenure, the president called me up. He was

bothered by a story in *Reader's Digest*, and he asked me to look into it and see whether it was true. I said, "I know it is true. The *Reader's Digest* fact-checking is meticulous. What is it, Mr. President?"

A fourteen-year-old girl on Long Island had found a purse with a lot of money in it. She called the owner, returned the purse, and went back to class and told her teacher and her classmates about it. The teacher, who was also a counselor, thought this would be a good matter for discussion. The discussion turned to the question of whether the girl was right to return the purse, and the teacher/counselor called for a vote. The class voted sixteen to eleven that she was a fool for returning the purse—and that was the end of it. There was no concluding discussion by the counselor/teacher, no suggestion of other considerations. Who am I, the counselor/teacher said, to impose my values on children?

Ronald Reagan, sometimes belittled by intellectuals and pseudointellectuals for not being intellectual himself, said to me, "Isn't that the job of a counselor, to counsel? Isn't it a counselor's job to have counsel to offer? Is this really going on in American schools?"

"Mr. President," I said, "it is worse than you think."

That is a horror story, but I am afraid it is all too true. It would be wrong to describe the teacher as an evil or malevolent person. This is simply a pretty good representation of our times. We are studiously neutral about values; there is no right or wrong. All we can do is get opinions—no substantive

decisions—and state our preferences and sentiments.

You know the story of the English jurist who invited teachers over for tea. He was angry at them because he didn't think they were doing a very good job of educating his children. During tea, he took them to the window and showed them his garden. They looked at his garden and said, "Goodness, it is mostly weeds, only a few flowers." He said, "I didn't think it was right to prejudice the garden toward strawberries and flowers. I thought I'd let the garden make up its own mind."

The Fall of the Berlin Wall

An interesting thing has occurred in the past ten years. (I now speak as a conservative speaking for conservatives.) I've been talking to a lot of disappointed, discouraged conservatives. There are a lot of hangdog looks out there among people who call themselves conservatives. They miss Ronald Reagan, and so do I. Paul Weyrich said recently that politics has failed. It is time to go back, he said, and work on the culture and forget about the politics.

Cal Thomas, the most widely syndicated columnist in America (he recently called me up to tell me that he had just passed George Will by two columns), has written a book in which he says that the involvement of Christians in American politics, in groups like the Christian Coalition, has been a mistake because, he said, laws don't change people, and policies don't change people; it happens from the bottom up.

Many grassroots conservatives around the country, Christian and otherwise, have picked up this theme. Many people are saying that involvement in politics was a mistake. But discouragement is the wrong conclusion, both factually and in terms of its dispiriting effect on us.

Politics, John Buchan wrote, can be a great and honorable adventure, and can achieve great ends. Sometimes we don't want to see the way the sausage is made, but we should not be discouraged from public activity, from public policy—even from politics.

One of the worst consequences of the Clinton impeachment is that it has made more Americans cynical. If someone had asked me to name the worst thing that was said in connection with the impeachment, I would have had a lot of things to pick from, but I would have selected this: "They all do it."

But they don't all do it—they don't all act in a low, shameless fashion. There are honorable men and women on both sides of the aisle, and I'm proud to know them. As people in Washington often do when they give speeches, I used to cite Harry Truman: "If you want a friend in Washington, buy a dog." But I don't say that anymore because I have more friends now than when I arrived in Washington. I count as friends men like Henry Hyde and James Rogan and Paul McHale from Pennsylvania, a Democrat, and my friends Joe Lieberman and Sam Nunn who have joined with me in an effort to shame those who are polluting our children's minds. There are decent men and women in that town. Our

children need to know that, and know that politics can be conducted honorably.

More to the point, when this country, through its leadership and its convictions, decides on something, it can make an important difference in the world. We won the cold war. The long twilight struggle against communism is basically concluded. Ten years ago, the Berlin Wall fell. That was one of the most extraordinary events of the past five hundred years. How many of our high school students know how extraordinary that was? Are we teaching them that? Are we teaching them that it fell because of the grit and determination of leaders like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and Lech Walesa?

Soon the whole world will know, with the publication of George Weigel's book *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*. I had lunch with George Weigel, the official biographer of the pope, who told me that the first time the Holy Father returned to Poland after becoming pope, 3 million Poles turned out in Victory Square. He kissed the ground. A deputy turned to President Jablonski, the communist head of Poland at the time, and said, "We can't kill them all."

It was a moral revolution: Reagan's resoluteness, Thatcher's resoluteness, people's unwillingness to give up their faith. It was over. It helped to arm the Afghans with Stinger missiles, but it was essentially over. That is something conservatives can take great pride in. That is the most consequential thing that has occurred in a very long time.

Good News: Drugs, Welfare, Crime

People ask how we can be encouraged about, let's say, drugs. They say that we've lost this war, that it's futile and therefore we need to decriminalize or legalize drugs. But from 1985 to 1992, drug use went down by 60 percent in this country. When I took office as President Bush's "drug czar" in 1989, we were already pushing back. The president asked me to put together a strategy. I worked with Joe Biden and Charles Rangel. Right now, I am co-chairman of the Partnership for a Drug Free America with Mario Cuomo.

This nation pushed back, in its schools and offices and homes, through priests and ministers and rabbis and drug treatment centers and employers and that lady who said "Just say no." A lot of supposedly smart people made fun of Nancy Reagan: What kind of a program is that—just say no? But the kids didn't make fun of her. They thought it made sense, and you couldn't go into a school in this country without seeing Just Say No posters, and you couldn't turn on a TV without seeing somebody jumping off a diving board into an empty swimming pool or two fried eggs in a pan—your brain on drugs. We pushed back, and we got a 60 percent reduction. We put together a bipartisan national drug control strategy.

The day I took office, four drug cartel heads were on the cover of *Time* magazine. The headline said, "Are these the most powerful men who have ever lived?" I said no—we are going to get them. Within two years, all four

were either dead or in jail because the United States, working with its allies, working with other governments, decided to go after this issue.

If you had asked conservatives over the past twenty years to name the most intransigent domestic problem in America, they would have told you welfare: We've got to do something about the welfare system. Well, we have done something about the welfare system. Conservatives pushed—conservative Democrats, conservative Republicans. Bill Clinton campaigned on ending welfare as we know it and then wouldn't sign the bills, but finally, under pressure, mostly from the Republican side and a little bit from the Democratic side, he signed. Today we have 47 percent fewer people on welfare than we had in 1994. That is an accomplishment of enormous significance.

Crime is down. Crime is down in New York City. New York is now the safest large city in the United States. That is extraordinary. Rudy Giuliani and Bill Bratton divided the city into grids to go after criminals—not just the big fish, but also the little fish, the guys who jump the toll booths at the subway stations, the people who do graffiti, the squeegee guys. When they arrested those guys, they found out they were responsible for a lot of the big crimes, too. That policy paid off, and it has now been imitated in many other cities.

The best police chief in the country is Reuben Greenberg, the black Orthodox Jew police chief of Charleston, South Carolina. Only in America. He is so conscientious that he once gave himself a citation for speeding. He said

he was going to lower the crime rate in Charleston, and he did. He said he was going to make public housing the safest part of Charleston, and he did. He did in Charleston what they did in New York and now has been done in a number of cities. As Frank Sinatra said, if you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere.

I was in New York last week. I am a New Yorker. I love the city, but I am not sentimental. I go there ready for a fight. It is a tough place. I was stuck in midtown traffic on the way to LaGuardia. A thousand cabs—and there wasn't anyone honking. There were signs up all over that read "\$200 fine for honking."

Conservatives talk about civil society and morality and virtue—I've done some of that myself—but there is something to good governance, to public policy intelligently applied, to writing good laws, and then to enforcing them. You can go an awful long way with good sense and good politics.

We have much to be proud of. The virtues of engagement have proved themselves in some of the most difficult areas of public life in the past ten years. There are reasons to be encouraged. Not just in New York, not just at the federal level, not just at the international level, but at the local level.

Center of the American Experiment has highlighted the issue of school choice and helped Governor Carlson in his extraordinary effort to improve schools. I understand that some sixty bills were brought before the Minnesota legislature because of the work of Center of the American

Experiment on the Minnesota Policy Blueprint.

If we abandon the field, the field won't be empty—it will be filled by someone else. Remember what William Butler Yeats said: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." I think about that a lot lately in connection with the young. If we do not give the young the guidance we think they should have, the people who are trying to sell them things, trying to persuade them to be certain kinds of things that we find repugnant, then we will be surrendering to the worst. If we throw up our hands and say there is nothing we can provide by way of guidance, the people who are giving them messages in movies, on the radio, and on television are not going to stop. There is no vacuum there. Where parents and teachers and counselors step out, others step in.

It is the same in politics. If we withdraw, others step in. There is plenty to do.

I don't want to seem too optimistic. The president of the United States engaged in the kind of activity he engaged in with an intern, lied about it to a grand jury, lied to the cabinet, lied to his lawyer, and lied to the American people, looking them straight in the eye—and then, worst of all, tried to destroy this young woman. I didn't think a person like that had a chance of staying in office. Not because he would be impeached, but because he would be so overcome at some point by a sense of shame that he would leave, or that the elders in his party would say

to him, "You cannot do this. The Democratic Party stands for certain values. People think we are a little questionable on these values. You are hurting us."

I talked to some of these Democratic elders and told them: "You need to tell him that he is hurting you and hurting the country and hurting the kids and hurting teachers and parents who try to teach lessons."

For the most part, what I got was, "If I do, I may be called by lawyers: your brother, and then maybe Ken Starr. And besides, the president won't listen anyway."

"Well, it is only half about him listening," I said. "The first half is about your doing your duty whether he does his or not, and yours is to speak truth to power."

From my point of view, it was not a great year. I had plenty of time to express my views, but I didn't prevail. It was an ignoble moment in the history of a free people. I think there will be huge repercussions. It isn't over. It will continue to echo and reverberate.

Whatever you think of that, you have wins and you have losses. You have good days and bad days. But there is too much of a positive record for conservatives—conservative ideas, conservative ideals—to abandon the field.

Critics and Box Office

The next challenges are in the ongoing discussion about popular culture. I don't think security checks at gun fairs are going to make a whole lot of difference with the problems we are confronting. If somebody has a good

idea about guns, let's hear it. I'll give you a good idea about guns from Charleston police chief Reuben Greenberg. In a number of cities, they paid people fifty dollars to bring in old guns. Greenberg said that this kind of program isn't worth a darn. People go up to their attics and bring down guns that don't work, pieces of guns, muskets, and they are all collecting fifty dollars. Greenberg said he didn't want those guns; he wanted the guns that are alive, guns that are in the hands of kids, guns that are in schools. Charleston, as a result, has a bounty program: If you see an underage kid with a gun, you tell the police, they get the gun, and you get five hundred dollars.

Most kids who have a gun—not all, as we know from the news—are going to tell somebody. They will show it to their friends. I heard Reuben Greenberg speaking to a group of high school students. He said, "You are in the men's room and one of your friends says, 'Hey, I got a Glock,' and another kid says, 'I got a Luger.' You say to yourself, 'I got a thousand dollars.'"

There is hardly anything going on in this country that we are worried about—whether it is teenage pregnancy, drugs, or guns—that somebody smart somewhere isn't doing something about. That is one of the great things that Center of the American Experiment does: identifies those people and ideas, and gets us all back onto the field and into the fight. Popular culture is a big fight.

The status of the American family is the single most important issue in American life. I don't mean family in

the sentimental sense that everything is always nice and peaceful and wonderful. Remember who I am related to. My wife is to my right, and my brother's wife is way to his left. Think about that. Families can have difficulties, but we see overwhelming evidence that we still need them. They do things that no other institution does. They are, as Michael Novak once said, the first and best and original Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and when they fail, it is hard to make up for them.

Education is a big issue for the year 2000, and it ought to be a big issue. Every citizen in this country ought to be complaining and demanding better education in our elementary schools and high schools. What we are doing for \$350 billion a year is an embarrassment. Here is all you need to know about the statistics. In the third international assessment of math and science, our kids competed against kids from other industrialized nations. The Asian nations weren't in it (which is like playing hockey and not having the Canadians in it) but we still didn't win.

Our fourth graders were close to the top in math and science. Our eighth graders were in the middle, and our twelfth graders were at the bottom. The longer you stay in school in America, in other words, the dumber you get relative to kids from other countries. That is an indictment of the system, not an indictment of the kids. It is not necessarily an indictment of the teachers, or even of many people in the system. The system has its own mind and its own life.

But notice the good news: It is not our kids. It is not genetic. These results are good news for virtually all our kids. The notion that you can't teach poor kids and minority kids to high standards is ridiculous. In the fourth grade, those children are doing very well—better than most kids in other parts of the world. By the time they get to the eighth grade, our kids are average, and our minority kids are dropping further down. By the time we get to the twelfth grade, our kids are at the bottom and the minority kids are further down because we don't keep raising the bar, we don't keep the level of aspirations up, and we abandon our children to mediocrity. We have not won on that issue, but there are some life signs. This ought to be a matter for great national debate.

I will return to my text with a story about being encouraged when you are discouraged. When I became secretary of education, I said that we were going to cut federal student aid programs for students who were rich or who were taking federal taxpayer money and using it to buy stereos and cars and three weeks at the beach. I led the CBS Evening News that night as the latest outrageous Reagan cabinet member. I was called the James Watt of the second term of the Reagan administration. I was called cruel, callous, and insensitive. The students reacted otherwise. I got lots of postcards from Fort Lauderdale saying, "Dear Bill, The beer is great, the music is loud, we're running out of money, send us another check." The kids knew I was talking at least a

partial truth about some of their friends.

I was in one controversy after another. I said that it was time that parents stop listening to a lot of the gobbledygook from teachers and start using their own common sense and insisting that common sense be taught in the classroom. Washington Post headline: "Bennett Bashes Teachers, Saying Parents Are More Expert." Actually, I didn't mind that so much, but some of my teacher friends and my teacher wife wondered whether I had to put it just that way.

It went on and on. Finally, after three weeks, seven major national newspapers were calling for my resignation. I was forty years old, the youngest, the poorest, and certainly the most ruffled member of the Reagan cabinet. All these Republicans took me aside the first week and said, "How old are you?"

"Forty," I said.

"You are in the cabinet," they said. "Why aren't you old like the rest of us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Learn, earn, serve. Didn't anybody tell you that?"

Nobody told me. I was in graduate school. Nobody mentioned this. I should have been in business school.

Anyway, I went to the cabinet meeting because "Bennett" was one of

the three items on the agenda. I had a pretty lowly place at the cabinet table because Reagan didn't even want my department. I was lucky even to sit at the table. When I arrived for the meeting, people drew away from me. Even though they were good Republicans, my being beaten up by the Washington Post, New York Times, and Los Angeles Times was not a wonderful thing. They didn't want to catch anything from me.

President Reagan had a folder in front of him that said "Bennett," and he started to read the titles of the editorials: "Bennett Must Go." "Bennett Is a Disaster." "Reagan, Get Rid of Bennett." My head went further and further down. He put the last one down, put the folder down, and said, "That's Bennett. What's wrong with the rest of you?"

Then President Reagan said to me, "They make fun of Hollywood, Bill, but one thing I learned out there is the difference between critics and box office. Just keep doing what you are doing."

Abraham Lincoln—the greatest president, in my view—often said that there is nothing inevitable about what happens in America. We are a free people and as a nation, free men. We live forever or die by suicide. I am for living forever. I hope you are too. n