

The book on Bennett: Bill Bennet's gambling problem

by [John Spalding](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

Should we judge Bill Bennett for being an obsessive gambler, for losing over \$1 million in a two-month period and \$8 million over ten years? He wouldn't have it any other way. In his 1998 bestseller, *The Death of Outrage*, Bennett bemoaned the wretched moral state of our nation, and said part of the problem is that we're afraid to judge people on moral issues. "We live in an era when it has become unfashionable to make judgments on a whole range of consequential behaviors and attitudes." He called for a revival of judgmentalism. "If to make judgments of better and worse, good and bad, fit and unfit, sound and unsound, competent and incompetent is to be judgmental," he wrote, "then there is a need to be judgmental and no need to apologize for it. . . . For a free people, the ordeal of judgment cannot be shirked. To try to shirk it is to avoid responsibility."

Bennett has never shirked that responsibility himself. He has climbed into positions of high moral authority—as director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy and before that secretary of education—and has spent decades tirelessly crusading against moral lapses. He believes public figures must be held to tough standards, for they are all role models. "When it comes to embracing and exemplifying core ethical values," he writes, "we must all do our part." Just think of the kids: "Children watch what we do as well as what say, and if we expect them to take morality seriously, they must see adults taking it seriously."

We recall how Bennett assailed Bill Clinton for his "sexual indiscipline," which he found "alarming in its compulsiveness, self-indulgence, and carelessness." Bennett probed the private behavior that tainted Clinton's public duties, so he must believe that his own moral behavior has harmed the entire country. "National prosperity, as it happens, is largely dependent upon lots of good private character," he writes. "If lying, manipulation, sloth, lack of discipline, and personal irresponsibility become commonplace, the national economy grinds down." Furthermore, "just as there are enormous financial benefits to moral health, there are enormous financial costs to

moral collapse.”

Readers of scripture might hesitate to judge Bennett, remembering that Jesus said “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” But Bennett has already blocked such an approach, which collapses “under the sheer weight of biblical evidence.” Christlike forgiveness cannot be invoked to spare a person moral criticism. “The attempt to use God’s forgiveness as a pretext to excuse moral wrong is a dangerous (and old) heresy known as antinomianism—literally, ‘against the law.’”

Of course, social conservatives can hold out hope that Bill Bennett will emerge from this dark chapter of his life and reclaim his role as one of their chief defenders of virtue.

And yet, as Bennett wrote: “Moral authority once having been compromised, who can with confidence expect it to be magically available in a time when sacrifice is needed?”