

# BOOK WORLD

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ILLUSTRATION BY ROMAN GENN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

## He Just Doesn't Understand

### THE DEATH OF OUTRAGE Bill Clinton and the Assault on American Ideals

By William J. Bennett  
Free Press. 154 pp. \$20

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**W**illiam J. Bennett, secretary of education and chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities under President Reagan, captured the public imagination with the bestselling *Book of Virtues*, a compendium of other people's writing that had something to teach about morality. In his new book, Bennett advances his own credo of right and wrong, and it is far less compelling. It is a slim book with a correspondingly slim premise: that the American public's failure to be outraged at President Clinton's lies about his private life is evidence of our "moral and intellectual disarmament."

The book has six brief chapters with the grandiose titles "Sex" (first of course), "Character," "Politics," "Law," "Judgment"—and "Ken Starr." Each chapter presents an italicized "Defense of President Clinton" followed by Bennett's refutation of that defense. Claiming to exercise "sound reasoning," Bennett sets himself up as the arbiter of morality and American ideals. The result reads like a partisan screed.

Bennett is outraged because so many Americans are *not* outraged at the president, even if they believe that the allegations of "sexual and criminal wrongdoing are true." Combining the words "sexual and criminal" is at the heart of Bennett's thesis—and his linguistic sleight of hand. Many people do not endorse the criminalization of consensual sex. Bennett may not like this, but that does not make him any more moral than they. One might argue, in fact, that it evinces a higher moral sense to distinguish between covering up crimes and a situation in which the only crime is the coverup. Bennett repeatedly refers to "crimes," "felony crimes," "criminal conduct," "criminal allegations," "criminal wrongdoing," "criminal conspiracy," and "criminal cover-

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up"—accusation by accretion and repetition rather than reason.

Ah, words, words. Bennett's language reveals a pervasive double standard. Defenses of Clinton are "the words of hired guns, spinners and partisans." He attributes the arguments he refutes to "Clinton defenders," "Clinton loyalists," "Clinton apologists," and "feminists." (We do not read of Starr defenders, loyalists or apologists, nor of Clinton attackers, haters or enemies.) All these labels grate, but the word "apologist" is particularly underhanded: It reframes explanations and defenses as apologies, implying unspecified misdeeds.

In Starr, Bennett sees only "clumsiness," "missteps," "lapses of political judgment" and "a certain tone-deafness." Ignoring criticism of Starr from a wide variety of sources, including former special prosecutors and independent counsels from both parties, he blames Starr's low popularity on "a well-orchestrated and relentless smear campaign"—even as he dismisses Hillary Clinton's reference to a "vast right-wing conspiracy" against her husband as "fantastic."

Bennett's substitution of implication for reasoning is particularly evident in an appendix that juxtaposes statements made about Watergate with statements made about the current scandals: for example, quotes by both Nixon and Clinton that they would like to get on with the job of running the country. These juxtapositions imply that the substance of the scandals is comparable. But the most revealing comparison with Watergate actually comes early in the book: Bennett suggests a "thought experiment" which describes moves that actually occurred in Watergate as if they had covered up a sexual liaison—actions such as breaking into a psychiatrist's office in search of information to discredit a witness, pressuring the IRS to investigate reporters, and establishing a "slush fund" to pay hush money. Bennett's purpose is to ask, If we are willing to forgive Clinton's lying to cover up a sexual affair, would we excuse any misbehavior on those grounds? But the section actually has the effect of dramatizing how much more egregious the events of Watergate were.

There are other instances in which Bennett's examples support the opposite of what he supposes. He writes, "Interpreting the actions of a president solely through a legal prism habituates Americans to think like lawyers instead of citizens. . . . The letter of the law is too cold and formal to have a beneficial influence on society." But in this spirit, legal terms like "obstruction of justice" and "suborning of perjury" conjure up, in most people's minds, matters far more weighty than engaging in and trying to cover up illicit sex. In rejecting this "legal prism," many Americans are thinking like citizens rather than lawyers.

Faulty, slippery-slope arguments abound. For example, after quoting citizens who said, of Clinton's sexual behavior, "Who are we to judge?" Bennett writes, "Without being 'judgmental,' Americans would never have put an end to slavery, outlawed child labor, emancipated women, or ushered in the civil rights movement." But the distinction between private acts like having sex and public offenses like slavery, child labor, and forbidding women and blacks to vote is precisely the distinction many Americans are making—and it is a highly moral one.

Bennett displays contempt for average Americans, calling us fools because we do not view the president the same way he does. Rather than seeking to understand the moral underpinnings of positions others take, he dismisses them as debased, lacking in morality. The people may be the wiser ones when they refuse to reduce complex notions of "character" and "morality" to personal sexual conduct. How about the morality of a country as wealthy as the United States being the only modern industrialized society that does not provide universal health-care coverage to all its citizens? Or the morality of the ever-widening gap between rich and poor? In this light, when voters say they care more about the economy or health care than about Monica Lewinsky, they are not just expressing petty self-interest; they are also taking moral stances.

To my mind and perhaps to the minds of those Bennett deplors, the real moral question is not: Did he or didn't he have sex/ lie about it/ apologize for it, but How have we all participated in and been sullied by a political, legal and journalistic system that has focused public attention on the president's private life rather than the many problems facing the country and the world? Many who refuse to support the president's impeachment do not defend his sexual behavior. They just say that this behavior should not be the object of an expensive investigation and media coverage. Bennett's diatribe is unfair because it is unbalanced. He blames only Clinton, and rejects or ignores any roles played by others.

The public is not incapable of outrage; they simply have different objects for it than Bennett would like them to. There is plenty of outrage at Linda Tripp's betrayal of friendship when she (illegally) taped conversations with Monica Lewinsky and turned them over to lawyers deposing Clinton, leading to his denials that constitute the much-touted "lying under oath," but this does not count as morality for Bennett; instead, it irritates him. "Why all the venom directed at Ms. Tripp?" he asks. Many also feel outrage at the pouring of public funds into an independent counsel investigation that moved far afield from the Whitewater events it was initially charged with investigating.

When allegations against the president reached a crescendo, so did his approval ratings. Bennett sees this as indifference, which he bemoans as an abandonment of "longstanding American ideals." But the approval ratings didn't just stay the same; they shot up. This is not a sign of indifference. It is a backlash, an expression of outrage against what I call "the argument culture"—relentless attacks on figures like the president by political opponents and the press. There are many who agree with Bennett that no president should be "above the law," but also feel that a president should not be pursued with laws that would not be applied to other citizens. Such sentiments uphold the longstanding American ideal of fairness.

Bennett sees the public "giving license not only to Mr. Clinton's corruption but possibly to our own as well." But jumping on the bandwagon of denunciation gives license to future overzealous prosecutors, civil litigants, and political opponents to try to destroy leaders they dislike by launching assaults on their private lives and character rather than debating them on the issues. ■