

William Bennett: the secret high-stakes gambling life of a former drug “czar”

Kate Randall
9 May 2003

William Bennett, secretary of education under Reagan and drug “czar” in the first Bush administration, has engaged in high-stakes gambling to the tune of as much as \$8 million in losses in recent years. This revelation was greeted with revulsion—but not surprise—by anyone who has followed the moral preachings of this reactionary zealot. It is a further exposure of the rank hypocrisy of the group of extreme-right ideologues who have justified the accumulation of unprecedented wealth through the assault on the social conditions of working people and the poor in the United States over the past two decades.

The gambling habits of Bennett—who has made his millions peddling books such as *The Book of Virtues* and *The Broken Hearth: Reversing the Moral Collapse of the American Family*—were detailed in an article by Joshua Green in the *Washington Monthly Online* this past weekend. Bennett has apparently been a high-roller on the gambling scene since at least the early 1990s. Green reports that Bennett would often visit casinos for two or three days at a time, and enjoyed lines of credit of at least \$200,000 at several of them.

Bennett was no small-time, recreational gambler. The *Washington Monthly* reports a source saying, “He’ll usually call a host and let us know when he’s coming. We can limo him in. He prefers the high-limit room, where he’s less likely to be seen and where he can play the \$500-a-pull slots. He usually plays very late at night or early in the morning—usually between midnight and 6 a.m.”

Although Bennett claims that “Over ten years, I’d say I’ve come out pretty close to even,” documents obtained by the *Washington Monthly* show Bennett wired more than \$1.4 million to cover his losses in one two-month period. On July 12, 2002, he reportedly lost \$340,000 at Caesar’s Boardwalk Regency in Atlantic City, and on April 5 and 6 of this year he lost more than \$500,000 at the Bellagio in Las Vegas.

After the story broke, Bennett defended his behavior, saying, “I adhere to the law. I don’t play the ‘milk money.’ I don’t put my family at risk, and I don’t owe anyone anything.” All true—and revealing—statements.

Bennett is a multimillionaire. In addition to profits from his moralizing books, he pulls in \$50,000 an appearance to spew out his reactionary drivel on moral virtues and traditional family values to select audiences. The fact that \$8 million in losses has had no impact on his family budget shows just how privileged and distant his lifestyle is from that of the majority of people who frequent casinos. For Bennett to tap into the “milk money” he would have to lose hundreds of millions of dollars.

The situation is different for the millions of lower-stakes gamblers who lose money at US casinos every day. While only a few decades ago gambling was restricted to Las Vegas and Atlantic City, New Jersey, in recent years casinos have sprung up in many metropolitan as well as rural areas across the country plagued by economic decline. Politicians have embraced casinos to make up for the fall in revenues resulting from shutdown industries and cuts in taxes on the wealthy. In Michigan, for example, where gambling was once a relatively rare activity, state residents spent over \$5 billion last year on legal forms of gambling.

While the casinos Bennett has frequented are surely happy to profit from his losses, the gambling houses in general target their business to the higher volume of lower-stakes customers. Gambling is big business. In Detroit, huge tax breaks have been granted to the three casinos that have set up business in the city. These gambling houses mainly target their business to workers and the poor in the city as well as working people from the surrounding suburbs. While many come for entertainment, a large number come with the unrealistic hope that they will “make it big,” take home large winnings and solve their economic problems. A far more

frequent outcome is indebtedness and gambling addiction.

The Michigan Department of Community Health writes on its web site: “For those who become addicted, gambling leads to serious family and financial strain. Approximately 5 percent of people who gamble ultimately become addicted. In Michigan, that translates to about 350,000 compulsive gamblers.”

On January 26, 2000, 38-year-old Solomon Bell, an off-duty cop from suburban Detroit, shot himself in the head after losing between \$15,000 and \$20,000 at two Detroit casinos. But according to William Bennett, such problem gamblers—and sufferers of other addictions—are morally weak and derelict and their addictions have nothing to do with the economic conditions under which they live.

Spending entire nights in the solitary activity of pulling the arm of a slot machine or playing video poker—both games that involve no thought or skill and which the house is strongly favored to win—would certainly be a symptom of gambling addiction and undoubtedly deeper psychological problems. For Bennett, however, the loss of millions—not to mention a mere \$20,000—was not grounds for contemplating suicide.

In *The Broken Hearth*, Bennett chastises “some on the American Left” who say that the breakdown of the family and America’s other social ills can be traced to “economic deprivation and social inequality, including a decline in job prospects and real income, wage stagnation, and an unraveling social safety net.”

Bennett has made an industry out of moral proselytizing as a crude cover for maintaining this social inequality, and defending capitalist society and its class rule. This includes support for reactionary domestic policies—including draconian sentencing laws for drug offenders, prosecuting children as adults, legal barriers to divorce and abortion—as well as the promotion of US imperialist aggression.

Bennett was one of the signatories of an October 1, 2001 open letter in the *Weekly Standard* which called for retaliating against Iraq for the September 11, 2001 suicide hijackings, regardless of whether the Hussein regime was in any way responsible. The letter read in part: “Even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack, any strategy aiming at the eradication of terrorism and its sponsors must include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power.”

Bennett was also in the audience of the Conservative Political Action Conference, January 30-February 2 in Arlington, Virginia, when right-wing columnist and television commentator Ann Coulter advocated execution

for John Walker Lindh, the so-called American Taliban. “We need to execute people like John Walker in order to physically intimidate liberals, by making them realize that they can be killed too,” Coulter told the cheering gathering of ultra-right Republicans.

He also devoted an entire volume—*The Death of Outrage: Bill Clinton and the Assault on American Ideals*—devoted to moralizing against Bill Clinton in connection with the Monica Lewinsky affair. According to Joshua Green, Bennett continued to gamble throughout the campaign to drive Clinton from office.

In the wake the gambling revelations, Bennett’s supporters have attempted to defend him by saying that he never personally condemned gambling, so he had not compromised his convictions. While this may be technically true, Bennett’s organization, Empower America, opposes legalized gambling and includes “problem” gambling as a so-called negative indicator of cultural health.

In the end, Bennett has been forced by all the publicity to give it up. “I have done too much gambling,” he said, “and this is not an example I wish to set. Therefore, my gambling days are over.” The conservative Concerned Women for America commented that it hoped Bennett would “remain firm in his resolve to eliminate gambling from his life and will not hesitate to seek any help he may need in keeping his resolve.”

The entire sordid affair is, in the end, not a moral issue but illustrative of the hypocrisy of those like William Bennett who are motivated in their personal and political lives not by principles, but by a right-wing and reactionary political agenda and an appetite for wealth and the luxuries that come with it.

With the profits gleaned from preaching to Americans about their moral deficiencies, Bennett entertained himself by dropping millions of dollars into slot machines and video poker. But he asks that he be forgiven his transgressions, because, after all, he didn’t “play the ‘milk money.’”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact