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## ESSAYS

### CHILDREN AND CULTURE IN MODERN AMERICA\*

WILLIAM J. BENNETT\*\*

After almost two years of work in police precincts, public housing projects, hospital emergency rooms, state legislatures and the bureaucratic corridors of Washington, it's nice to be back on the familiar territory of American higher education. It almost seems as though I never left.

In one important sense, at least, I never did. I spent the better part of fifteen years on college campuses and their satellites—as a student, philosophy professor, and administrator. And since then, in my no longer quite so brief term in government, I have tried to maintain the connection.

In fact, there has been a rewarding consistency in my nearly ten years of government service—first as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, then as Secretary of Education, and now as so-called “drug czar.” I feel proud and pleased and blessed to have had my jobs in government, because I have had the rare privilege to fight in the public arena for things I believe in. I have had the still rarer privilege to do so directly on behalf of two presidents, both of whom I like, respect, and admire a great deal. And through it all, I have been allowed to continue in the true spirit of my academic training—to speak at length about the condition of our children: in my first job, about the cultural legacy we owe them; in my second, about the structure and substance of the education we owe them; and in my present job, about the protection and safety we owe them.

Now I find this to be a topic much in the news: the condition of children in the culture of modern America. And it is, as well, a topic central to the historic mission of this fine university. This evening, then, I'd like to discuss with you some of

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\* This essay was drawn from a speech Mr. Bennett delivered at the University of Notre Dame on October 17, 1990 on the invitation of the Thomas J. White Center.

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what I've learned and seen and concluded in recent years about children and our treatment of them.

### I. THE CONDITION OF OUR CHILDREN

Let's take a quick look at some of the attention our children are getting. Governor Cuomo proclaimed the 1990s to be the "Decade of the Child." A couple of weeks ago *Time* magazine's cover story was devoted to "the sorry plight of America's most disadvantaged minority: its children." At the end of last month a special edition of the *Today* show focused exclusively on the condition of our children. The United Nations recently convened a World Summit for Children. And this past summer a special commission of prominent political, medical, education, and business leaders issued a report on the health of America's teenagers. They called it *Code Blue*, and in it they wrote that "never before has one generation of American teenagers been less healthy, less cared for, or less prepared for life than their parents were at the same age."

*Code Blue* reported that "this crisis is not, as some people believe, confined to communities that are suffering from poverty and crime . . . it involves millions of teenagers in every neighborhood across the nation." And it cited a number of supporting statistics. More than a million adolescent pregnancies each year, or one for every ten teenage girls, a rate at least twice as high as that in most other industrialized countries. More than 400,000 teenage abortions each year. A suicide rate for teenagers that has doubled since 1968, making it the second leading cause of death among adolescents. A 30-fold increase since 1950 in the number of 14- to 17-year-olds arrested each year. Homicide as the leading cause of death among 15- to 19-year-old minority youth. More than two million children and adolescents reported abused or neglected each year—with many more cases assumed, but not reported. And drug use, of course: no longer as widespread as five years ago, but still far too prevalent.

And then there are tabloid anecdotes. Some are by now quite famous—like the Bensonhurst slaying and the Central Park jogger. But there are many others I have found on my beat: drugs. I talked to a police officer not long ago. He had received a complaint from neighbors, and he entered an apartment to find a four-year-old boy and a one-year-old girl. They had been in there, by themselves, for three days. The four-year-old had been left by his mother to care for the one-year-old. They were holding hands, the boy doing his manful best

to protect his little sister. "My mama told me to take care of her, and I will," he told the officers. His mother, it turned out, had been walking the street for money to support her crack habit.

You may have read the story of a West Coast six-month-old baby who died of a crack overdose. How does a six-month-old overdose on crack? Her mother or father, we're not sure which, blew crack into the baby's mouth to quiet its crying.

You may have heard the story of a Detroit woman who gave a drug dealer her 13-year-old daughter as payment for overdue debts.

Grim stuff, all of it. What does it mean? Let me offer you several warnings about possible conclusions.

First of all, beware of stern voices speaking wildly counter-intuitive and apocalyptic statistics. Ours is not a third world country, and for the most part our children do not live in a sewer of disease and depravity. You can make quite a name for yourself these days if you cobble together a few misleading statistics and argue, for example, that the 1980s were economically ruinous for all but a few hundred extraordinarily rich shyster lawyers and bankers. But the truth is rather more complicated and encouraging than that, as I suspect your own family experience would tend to confirm. And the same holds for American children. Most of them are not violent, sexually promiscuous drug takers. And we do not have a higher infant mortality rate than the Republic of South-Central Nowhere. New York *Post* headlines may not be a complete reflection of the state of the union. Let's remember that.

But while you're at it, remember too that tabloid reality is reality just the same, that the horror stories are real, that there are a sickening and increasing number of them, that the statistics are not simply made up wholecloth. There is no question in my mind, at least, that in 1990, in the world's greatest, wealthiest, best and most compassionate nation, the condition of too many of our children is *not* good. Among many of them, there is low educational achievement and moral confusion. And among some of them—not a majority, perhaps, but a sizable minority—there is abuse, neglect, and very bleak prospects for the future.

I have seen these children many times in my current job. Are they typical of America? No. But are they a myth or media creation? No. And is it a scandal? Absolutely. So what do we do about them? First of all, I think, we need to face a few uncomfortable facts.

## II. RECOGNIZING THE PROBLEM, AND MISSING THE SOLUTION

Having stated the dimensions of the problem, the *Code Blue* commission comes to the correct, unobjectionable conclusion that unlike the problems of earlier generations, those of today's teenagers are rooted in *behavior* rather than in physical illnesses like infections and diseases. Excessive drinking, drug use, promiscuity, and violence are (according to the Commission report) major threats to the current generation. This is by now the standard analysis—that too many American children are being victimized by a partial breakdown of our culture, our values, and our moral norms: drastic alterations in family composition and stability; limited and weakened contact between young people and adults; erosion of traditional neighborhoods; and so on.

So far, so good. Americans have always been good at diagnosing our own troubles. But prescribing solutions is a very different matter—and here is where the standard analysis seems weak, dull, and shop-worn. The *Code Blue* report says the problem is behavior, not health. And that's correct. Yet its major recommendations are health-service related (guaranteed access to health services and health instruction for teenage students, for example). In other words, *Code Blue* identifies a crisis of the spirit, a sickness in the soul, and it recommends (in effect) aspirin, Band-Aids, and a hall pass to see the nurse.

This simply won't do. In fact, I would argue that this kind of reflexive response to social ills is worse than irrelevant—it is actually part of the problem to begin with. I will say it flat out: were our travails still largely programmatic, monetary, and service-related, we would already have solved many of them. Over the last 25 years we have devoted countless billions of dollars and hundreds of programs to the improvement of our children's well-being. At the beginning, it was an absolute necessity. But can anyone pretend that it has lately made things noticeably better for the children we've been talking about tonight?

Cultural problems demand cultural solutions. And that's the rub: our modern American sensibility is very often allergic to the most serious questions of culture, spirit, and values. Yes, of money, science, technology, medicine, bureaucracy—we will talk about and work on them incessantly, vigorously, and probably better than anyone has ever talked and worked on them before. But when the subject is character, when it is right and wrong (as it emphatically is, in this case), we tend to grow uncomfortable and diffident.

I understand the discomfort. I understand the diffidence. Ours is a society deliberately and wisely divided into separate spheres of private and public action. Liberty requires it. But, as our Founders understood, liberty also requires a strong measure of virtue in each sphere. And the public good rests its foundation on the qualities of private men. Madison wrote in Federalist 55 that a government devoted to liberty “presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form.” In America, then and now, general liberty cannot survive a neglect of virtue.

Again, public action should not and need never extend its full reach into strictly private terrain. But the two spheres do approach and affect each other at the margin. And when the private sphere comes forward in partial ill-health, then public *conversation*, at least, should not and need not slink away in embarrassed silence. That we can no longer afford. What this means concretely is that we must confront our discomfort and talk openly and candidly about the moral good as an essential part of our life together. I know the automatic response from some quarters (believe me, I’ve heard it a few times already these past nine years): “The Puritans are coming, the Puritans are coming!” But fear of renewed Puritanism in late 20th century America is a poor excuse; Cotton Mather has been dead for 250 years, and this country is hardly at risk of a renewed interest in his thinking. We need to have a calm, complete, and honest talk about some of the most troubling aspects of contemporary American culture. The longer we wait, the more trouble we’ll see. The longer we avoid these questions, the worse things will get.

C.S. Lewis once wrote (in one of the great modern essays on education, *The Abolition of Man*): “We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and then bid the geldings be fruitful.” He was right. If we ridicule and caricature morality as the hang-up of uptight, obsessive prudes, there will be a cost. It will be to our children.

But it needn’t be this way. Take the case of my own current subject, drugs, a problem with obvious and devastating public consequences, but a problem first and foremost, just the same, of private behavior, of morality. Not surprisingly, public conversation about drugs was, until recently, devoted largely to aimless handwringing and expressions of despair. In the spring of 1989, when I was being confirmed by the Senate for my job as drug czar, I remember reading mournful notes of condolence in newspaper editorials and columns. My job

would be "mission impossible," the *New York Times* reported sadly. The problem was "spinning wildly out of control," while others wrote it was "getting worse, with no end in sight."

Today, not two years later, things look very different. Every available piece of evidence suggests, instead, that overall the drug problem is getting better, not worse. Why is that?

Official action has helped—no doubt about it. The Federal government is now spending record amounts of money on drug interdiction, law enforcement, education, and treatment, and many States are, too. We are deploying that money more intelligently and less haphazardly than in the past. Very useful, much of it. But something even more important has happened: we have recovered our public mind—our moral clarity—about a dangerous private behavior.

Embarrassment in this area has faded; in fact, it now seems almost antiquated. Taking drugs is wrong. Most everyone says so—and they say it out loud, and often. America wants this problem over. And the private voices give strength to the official actions; indeed, they are a necessary condition of the effectiveness of those actions. And so fewer and fewer people are taking drugs. It's not a simple process, this "American capacity for self-renewal," as one historian described it. But it is definite, it is discernible, and it is replicable. And the first step is an open attempt to grapple with moral principles. So let me suggest that when it comes to children, our society better grapple with these notions. Here's my moral of the story; here are matters we ought to address for the sake of our children.

1. We must speak and act on the family's behalf. Seek viable substitutes for the family when absolutely necessary, but seek to sustain and fix the family first. The family after all is the original and best department of health, education and welfare. On this job I have seen families working in all sorts of places—not just in Middletown, U.S.A., but on Mean Street, U.S.A. too. When families work, children tend to make it. But far too many American families aren't working well today. We should try—we have a responsibility to try—to substitute some good surrogates (like orphanages) when the family fails. But our best surrogate institutions are to families what artificial hearts are to real hearts. They can work. They can even work over time. But they are not nearly as good as what they replace. And everyone knows they're not as good. Why? Because a parent's love for his child cannot be fully replicated by someone paid to care for that child, even a very good someone.

We should understand the family primarily as a trust held by parents on behalf of their children. We know that young people can grow up by themselves, but they can't be raised by themselves. A family's first object of love and attention must be its children. Cornell psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner once said, "In order to develop, a child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care and joint activity with the child." When asked to restate what he meant by "irrational involvement," he said, "Somebody has got to be crazy about that kid!"

I'm sure many of you have read William Golding's book, *Lord of the Flies*. It paints a picture of untutored human nature—of children living alone in the coarsened environment of a remote island, without the involvement of adults. The picture is not pretty at all. The moral of the story is that the membrane separating civilized behavior from barbarism is a thin one. For children, adults are that membrane. You needn't travel to a desert island to see this truth in action; in some cities, all you have to do is travel to the nearest street corner, or subway. We have talked about the relevant statistics and anecdotes already. The amazing thing is that where the membrane is present, where parents do their work, children can survive even enormous disadvantages.

2. We must understand the mission of our homes and schools as in part to help instill sound and full character in our children. We've done a reasonably good job in recent years teaching our children the tender-hearted latitudinarian virtues like tolerance, understanding, self-esteem and sensitivity. And that's fine. But I believe we are still waffling on the need to teach the tougher-minded, resilient virtues, like self-discipline and self-control, individual and civic responsibility, perseverance, and hard work. To neglect these is a mistake. Children need to recognize that they are more than mere observers in their own lives — and that they must act for themselves, and not simply be acted upon. And that lesson cannot be conferred. It must be learned through effort; it must be earned.

3. We must develop a fair appreciation for the real strengths and limitations of government effort on behalf of children. Government, obviously, cannot fill a child's emotional needs. Nor can it fill his spiritual or moral needs. Government is not a father or a mother. Great as it might be, government has never raised a child. And it never will.

This does not absolve government of its responsibilities. Government, through law and discourse, can legitimate and delegitimate certain acts. In a free society, where the people



decide, leaders must understand that few things they do matter more than speaking about the right things in the right way. I do believe (with qualifications) that statecraft is soulcraft. But let's remember too that government is an auxiliary, not the primary agent, in the development of a people's moral disposition. Families, churches, schools, and individuals are the primary agents and means. The state does not, cannot, and even should not always pick up where families and individuals leave off. In the end, a decent society will not flourish or decay because of what goes on in Congressional committees, the courts, state houses or even the White House. Because regeneration comes from within.

So let me try to tie all of this together. Values and culture are not a sideshow—a distraction from the more “real” and “pressing” issues we face like, say, the capital gains tax cut and reducing the Federal deficit. They are every bit as “real”—indeed, they are more real, more important, and have more impact on the lives of our children.

Not long ago a university professor was quoted in the *New York Times* saying that President Bush had lost his ability to announce any new initiatives that cost money, and “that’s why you see these symbolic causes—the flag, abortion, family values.” That’s flat-out wrong. For those who believe that values, culture, and moral norms are abstract and merely symbolic, just wait awhile. Remember, nothing more powerfully determines a child’s behavior than his internal compass, his beliefs, his sense of right and wrong. If a child firmly believes, if he has been taught and guided to believe, that drugs, that promiscuity, that assaulting other people are wrong things to do, this will contribute to his own well-being and to the well-being of others. And if this lesson is multiplied a million times—that is, taught a million times—we will have greater and broader well-being, fewer personal catastrophes, less social violence, fewer wasted and lost lives. The character of a society is determined this way: by means of individual morality accruing social capital from generation to generation—in our children. Private belief is a condition of public spirit. But the investment in private belief must be constantly renewed—by adults. Because that is our job.

During his visit to the U.S. earlier this year, Lech Walesa reflected on the dramatic revolutions occurring in countries all over the world. He reminded all of us that the job of social reconstruction is not finished once the right political system is established. To Americans in particular he said this: “Please take care of this country. If you do not lead us, who will?” We

have led the world in the aspiration for freedom, and much of the world has taken our cue and adopted our principles. Now comes the time for America to lead in an area beyond the political. Now comes the time for America to show the world that we understand what it means to care for our children. Let us lead in that, too.

