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POKER**

MAY 2003



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Albany, NY 12208
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William Bennett Folds on Video Poker

Harvey Pack was for two decades the voice of the New York Racing Association which runs horse racing at Belmont, Aqueduct and Saratoga Race Tracks in New York. One of his many roles was to introduce fans to the world of racetrack characters. He frequently told the story of an old horseplayer named Clark. Clark, in the course of one year, lost his job, his house, and his marriage. He ended up playing horses while living in a one-room apartment adjacent to Aqueduct Race Track. Harvey ran into him one day and asked Clark how he was doing. The response from Clark was "I think I'm about even."

Who knew that Clark in 2003 would morph into moralist William Bennett? William Bennett, when confronted with a report that he had lost \$8 million in casinos over a decade said, "Over 10 years, I'd say I've come out pretty close to even." William Bennett might not be living in an apartment next to Aqueduct, but Clark may have come out closer to even than William Bennett did.

As has been recounted in the press, William Bennett was revealed to be a whale. He is a huge bettor who likes to play high-stakes video poker machines in Las Vegas and Atlantic City. Initially, Bennett said in his defense that he adhered to the law, he didn't bet the family's milk money, and he didn't owe anybody anything. To Bennett, "gambling has never been a moral issue." After the publication of the articles in both the Washington Monthly and Newsweek, Bennett said, "I have done too much gambling, and this is not an example I wish to set. Therefore, my gambling days are over."

The reaction to Bennett's gambling produced a large number of intriguing comments. Some liberal commentators who might otherwise claim that private, legal consensual behavior was harmless enjoyed holding Bennett to the same standards that Bennett has set for everyone else. These commentators would have Bennett thrust in the same panoply of hypocrites as Henry Hyde, Bob Livingston and Newt Gingrich.

Some conservatives were perplexed by Bennett's behavior, but most defended him. They utilized a tone normally adapted by liberals in their defense of people attacked by Bennett. They claimed it was private behavior, nobody was hurt, and he never attacked gambling. The liberal rebuttal was that given Bennett's belief that private behaviors affected public morals, it was only fitting that Bennett be judged by his own stricter standards.

I think that most of the arguments miss the point. Whether or not William Bennett was a hypocrite is a minor issue. The issue should be that if Bennett truly believes that gambling isn't sinful, he ought to be standing up for it. That's what his philosophy is all about. He may not have been a hypocrite, but he engaged in non-virtuous behavior.

If he did nothing wrong he should be saying so. He shouldn't be issuing neo-Clintonian apologies about his allegedly excessive behavior. If he did nothing wrong, he should not have folded. He should have persevered.

Those of us who find nothing wrong with gambling needed a moralist not so much to champion gambling but to explain why it is innocent behavior. We needed someone to explain why gambling was unlike other portions of what Bennett might term the “radical individualistic ethos.” Why isn’t gambling a failure of self-discipline, selfishness, or idleness – which Bennett finds to be the opposite of work?

A person who subscribed to the values in Bennett’s, Book of Virtues or The Moral Compass would not fall back meekly and plead nolo. What happened to the timeless virtues? Where were courage, responsibility, perseverance, leadership, and standing fast? What happened to the man who wrote, “Responsible people are mature people who have taken charge of themselves and their conduct, who *own* their actions and *own* up to them – who *answer* for them.”

A responsible party would have explained why gambling was faultless. He would not have issued a statement that was the equivalent of “no controlling moral authority” followed by a retreat.

We deserved a statement from Mr. Bennett on the morality of gambling. At the very least, we merited something on the indistinguishability between gambling, speculation, and investment. We needed something like Benjamin Graham’s, “Outright speculation is neither illegal, immoral, nor (for most people) fattening to the pocketbook.” Instead, we got nothing.

Maybe in the future, William Bennett will return to the position that gambling is innocent. If he should do so, I strongly suggest that an appropriate present to him might be any one of two dozen works on video poker available at the Gambler’s Book Store in Las Vegas. www.gamblersbook.com. High stakes video poker, when played properly, affords the casino almost no advantage at all. If Mr. Bennett learned the proper strategy, he would not be down \$8 million. He would in fact be truly about even.