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Culture in
Education**

By William J. Bennett



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By William J. Bennett

Since leaving government I have had a chance to reflect on the three posts I have held in the Reagan and Bush Administrations: chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Secretary of Education, and director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. In looking back I realize that almost all of the disputes that I was involved in were fundamentally disputes over the condition and direction of our culture. In each of these jobs I found myself in the middle of cultural matters, cultural controversies, and cultural fights.

Two examples help make the point, I think. The first occurred shortly after I was named chairman of the NEH. I was reviewing “documentary” films that had been produced with taxpayer money. One of the “documentaries” was called *From the Ashes: Nicaragua*, a film produced by the Wisconsin Humanities Committee. It showed the poor, unhappy workers of Nicaragua toiling with bent backs and sad countenances, until the Sandinistas rolled into town. Then, the people dropped what they were doing, perked up and began to sing. They were transformed. All of a sudden everyone looked a lot better—happier, handsomer, and more beautiful. I was told this film was an educational documentary, but it turned out to be nothing more than an outrageous piece of left-wing political propaganda. I denounced the film, describing it to *The New York Times* as “unabashed socialist-realism propaganda, a hymn to the Sandinistas,” and indicated we would take steps to stop funding this kind of thing.

My liberal critics went nuts. My predecessor at NEH, Joseph Duffy, said “the endowment is not a moral pulpit.” The director of the film warned of “political and artistic censorship.” Others said my action would have a “chilling effect” on free speech and the free expression of ideas, and so forth. I got this kind of reaction for simply insisting that they not use taxpayer money, or the name of the humanities, to fund political propaganda.

Welcome to the cultural wars.

Nine years (and many controversies) later, I was “drug czar” and attending a meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans. The organizers of the event asked me to talk about the role of the church in the drug effort, particularly in regard to treatment. During the speech I encouraged churches to get involved in fighting the war on drugs because, I said, “the drug problem is fundamentally a moral problem—in the end, a spiritual problem. It is seeking meaning in a place where no meaning can come.” I then said:

I continue to be amazed how often people I talked to in treatment centers talk about drugs as the great lie, the great deception—indeed a product, one could argue, of the great deceiver, the great deceiver everyone knows. “A lie” is what people call drugs and many, many people in treatment have described to me their version of crack, simply calling it “the devil.” This has come up too often, it has occurred too much, too spontaneously, too often in conversation, to be ignored. So I applaud your effort to bring those in need to the God who heals.

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Media Salvo. The people in the audience appreciated the fact that I repeated the comments of the people in drug treatment programs. They saw it as an invitation to get involved in treatment programs and minister to the spiritual needs of people, so that drug addicts could get real help instead of a phony and deceptive lie. The day following my remarks a *San Francisco Chronicle* headline blared, "Bennett Blames Satan for Drug Use." The *Sacramento Bee* wrote, "Illegal drugs are indeed the devil's handiwork, federal drug czar William Bennett said." And you can imagine the cartoons.

Now, I think most Americans would agree that a lot of people addicted to drugs have a spiritual problem, just as I think most Americans would agree that taxpayer money should not be used for political propaganda. What these two examples help illustrate, I think, is that when you enter the cultural arena you had better gird yourself for battle. And you had better be prepared to run up against the prevailing liberal orthodoxy.

The interesting thing is that although I was often described by the media as one of the most "controversial" figures in Washington, many of my observations were exceedingly common observations—maybe they were said with an edge and a certain pungency and feistiness—but nevertheless the sentiments I expressed were pretty straightforward, pretty typical, and pretty ordinary American sentiments. And yet this led (at least in my career) to a great deal of controversy, whether we're talking about *From the Ashes: Nicaragua*, or about American education, or about the drug problem as a moral and spiritual problem.

When we are talking about culture we are talking about the "values environment" in which we live and, most important to me, that environment of values, signals, and directions—the green lights, yellow lights and red lights—which comprise the environment in which we raise our children. At its best, I think the culture offers a view of the good life, standards of right and wrong, and ways in which responsible individuals ought to behave. It also offers a perspective on things like knowledge, work, virtue, and beauty. It is about matters that we attend to intentionally, and with some purpose and focus.

Culture matters. There are a lot of research studies that tell us that what is in the culture—the signals that are sent, what people value, and what values people have—has a lot to do with what people will do, how they will behave, and even, in some circumstances, how they will turn out. Culture helps shape the beliefs and convictions, the internal compass, that determine individual behavior.

But culture is not simply about matters of individual behavior. When we are talking about the culture, we are also talking about our collective social agenda, our work together. The state and health of our culture determines broad social and civic purposes—for example, how we think of our schools, our colleges and universities, our churches, our entertainment, our art and our literature. The state of our culture tells us a lot about what things we value and the kinds of purposes we as a people will strive toward.

Schools and Culture. I want to discuss the relationship between our schools and our culture. There is a lot of research that tells us that the character of a school, its *ethos*, is its most important feature. The kind of institution it is, the kind of things it values most, and the kind of things it values least determine the kind of school it is.

I believe that the major reason that education has deteriorated in America is because our schools were systematically, culturally deconstructed. They were taken apart. Many of the things which mattered most in our schools were removed, and they were set adrift.

I was at a conference recently given by a foundation on the West Coast which gives awards to teachers based on their teaching excellence. I spoke on the topic, "What do Americans want from their Schools?" I was happy to speak to the issue, since this was the first time in a long time that I

got a really easy one. And I told the audience what Americans wanted from their schools. We know what they want from their schools, because we have asked them and they have told us, and told us the same thing year after year after year: first, teach our children how to speak, write, read, count, and think correctly. And second, help them to develop reliable standards of right and wrong that will help guide them through life. These are pretty sensible expectations. Which disciplines should we teach in order for children to learn these things? Math, English, history, and science—so say the American people.

Different Priorities. Following my speech there was a panel of Chief State School Officers. Each one began their remarks by saying they'd been waiting for years to get the chance to tell me what they *really* thought of me. And after doing that they each said, "Here are my ideas about what schools are about." And then they said the purpose of school is to teach students that we live in an "increasingly inter-dependent world," and schools should teach young people to appreciate "diversity" and have "tolerance" toward people who hold other views. But nobody said anything about teaching students how to speak, write, read, think, and count correctly or developing reliable standards of right and wrong. It occurred to me, No wonder we were talking past each other when I was Secretary of Education. Representatives of the education establishment do not think the schools exist for the same reasons I do. We are engaged in an entirely different enterprise. And this became clearer to me as they went on.

We then had an interesting dispute about priorities and who should actually decide what schools should teach. I objected to what they said. I told them, "I did not tell you what I think the schools should do. I told you what the American people want the schools to do." They kept saying, "Well, we disagree with the American people." And I kept saying, "But they're *their* schools; they're not *your* schools." Well, clearly this is not a hard one to figure out. They are the American peoples' schools. The education bureaucrats, or "educrats," are hired hands and they should do the peoples' will. But they are *not* doing the peoples' will, and the reason they are not is that they have a wholly different understanding of what the schools should be about. One of the reasons they have a different understanding of what the schools are about is because the schools have been culturally deconstructed.

Ron Edmonds, who was a very impressive teacher and administrator, started the "Effective Schools Program" in the 1970s. Unfortunately Ron Edmonds died in the early 1980s; we could very much use his wisdom today. He talked about the characteristics of effective schools. I would like to discuss some of what Ron Edmonds thought the marks of effective schools are and in so doing, illustrate (1) how our schools have been culturally deconstructed and (2) what the task of culturally reconstructing our schools might involve.

The first mark of an effective school, Edmonds said, is a *safe and orderly environment*. You do not have to be very old to remember the debunking of order that took place in the '60s and '70s. But it turns out that order really is a necessary condition for a good school. All the classroom management books in the early part of this century told the teacher, the first thing you have to do is get order. If you do not have order, you cannot teach. But the response to lack of order in the late '60s and '70s in the schools was to create the "open classroom," so there was not any order at all. By the way, when we ask American high school students what is the biggest problem they face in the classroom, they do not cite drugs or violence. They say the biggest problem they face is disruption by other students who will not let them learn. The classroom is not controlled, and therefore, they cannot learn. We must once again regain order in the classroom if we hope to improve American education.

The second mark of an effective school is a *clear and focussed academic mission*, including math, English, history, and science. If anything got exploded in the cultural deconstruction of the

American school, it was the notion of a clear and focussed mission. The curriculum expanded to include more and more “fluff” elective courses. As this went on, people forgot the answers to the question, “Why is math or English or history or science more important than ‘Rock ’n Roll as Poetry’ or ‘Baja Whale Watch’?” And now we are seeing this trend continue with the kind of “multicultural” curriculum being proposed in New York, an idea that will have particularly pernicious effects.

One of the things I noticed as Secretary of Education was that when we found good schools, they were similar to what Tolstoy said about good families: they are all good for the same reasons. We found that the good schools for poor black kids or poor Hispanic kids in the inner city have the same general features as the good schools in the suburbs. And now, with the kind of multicultural curriculum that has been proposed in New York and elsewhere, we are moving away from what works.

As Secretary of Education the thing that I most objected to in the education of the poor in America—particularly poor blacks and Hispanics—was that they used to get “back-of-the-bus” math and “Jim Crow” science. Not the real stuff, but the watered-down stuff, because of the assumptions of people in the schools that these kids couldn’t handle it. But now, they’re being thrown off the bus completely. They are told to go back and study Thirteenth or Fifteenth Century African history. There is no evidence that if they are taught African history that good things will happen, that it will improve their motivation or their future employment prospects. It will—to the degree that they are already alienated from our central, civic institution—make that alienation even more complete. Their alienation is there for a lot of reasons. One of the reasons is that they have too many people who are telling them that these institutions are not going to do them any good anyway.

It has been said before, but it needs to be said again: if you were Grand Kleagle of the Ku Klux Klan, you could think of no better way to keep blacks out of the mainstream of American life than to give them a curriculum which is entirely divorced from the mainstream of American life. You would teach the white children about DNA, the Constitutional Convention, the First Amendment, and the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and you would get black kids off studying some obscure Thirteenth Century African anthropology, so they will not cause any serious competition to white society. This would be a disaster for those black children. Many advocates of an Afrocentric curriculum may have the best intentions in the world, but this will be the effect of their effort. What these children need is an immersion in the culture of America and the West. They need an immersion not for our sake but for their sake, because we would like to see them have the same equal educational opportunity as everyone else. So, we need to regain a clear and focused academic mission.

The third mark of an effective school is *instructional leadership*. Schools must be led. An attack on legitimately constituted authority and the notion of a leader—as opposed to a discussion group facilitator—was effectively carried out in the ’60s and ’70s. In effect you had schools being run by committees rather than by principals. The way we began to destroy American education was this attack in the ’60s and ’70s that talked about principals as “wardens” and students as “prisoners.” It’s worth recalling the many books that at the time undermined the idea of authority. One of the first was Neil Postman’s book, *Teaching As a Subversive Activity*. This view eliminated almost all of the necessary conditions of successful schools.

The fourth mark of an effective school is *high expectations*, another victim of cultural deconstruction. A popular poster during the late 1960s said (as I recall), “I am not on Earth to live up to your expectations. You are not on Earth to live up to mine.” Unfortunately, a lot of kids said that to a lot of teachers and somewhere around the early 1970s a lot of teachers did not know what to say in response. I ran workshops for English and history high school teachers in the early ’70s. We asked, “What topic do you want us to cover?” And they said, “Authority. By what virtue do

people have authority? When is it ever right for someone in authority to act like they have authority?" So, we brought in surgeons, and painters, and judges, and architects, and other people who have authority, and they explained how authority is exercised not for the sake of those in authority, but for the people for whom those in authority are responsible. Only if teachers are clear about, and confident in, their own authority can they use it to draw out the best in their students. Students often do not think well of themselves; their teachers must help them to aim higher. Without the teacher's upward leverage, the students will sink.

The fifth mark of an effective school is *student time-on-task*. Along with everything else, one of the attacks that was being made on school was that it was repressive and coercive, and students should be free to do what they want to do, and they will "naturally" come to knowledge. Left to their own, the argument went, and they will become little Descartes'. That is a romantic view and it is flat-out wrong. If you believe nothing else, believe me on this: the most important predictor of what a child will learn is how much time he spends on a task. Some kids can pick it up with virtually no effort and some kids can spend all year on something and never get it. But for the great mass of kids, if they spend time on it, they will learn it.

That is why we have what Chester Finn, one of the leading authorities on education, calls the "Harriet Tubman effect," that is, something approaching 85 percent of the 17 year olds in America know who Harriet Tubman is, while only about one-third of our high school seniors can place the Civil War in the right half century. Is Harriet Tubman worth knowing about? You bet. So is Abraham Lincoln. And so is George Washington. And so are the approximate dates of the Civil War. Why, then, the "Harriet Tubman effect"? Because she is taught in the schools. If you teach children things, most of them will learn. And since the decision was made to teach women like Harriet Tubman in American high schools people know who she is. Now let's apply the same principle to algebra and other things.

By the way, if students are not studying Harriet Tubman or other worthwhile subjects, then they are learning other things. My son, one of the lights of my life, was out playing in the yard with his friends a year or so ago. They were running around and calling each other by some very unusual names—Michelangelo, Donatello, Raphael, and Leonardo. I turned to my wife Elayne, and I said, "You made a great choice in kindergartens. They are teaching them the masters of Western art." Of course, I was immediately corrected. These are the names of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. My son occasionally watches the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and he picked up their names, and they are not the easiest names to learn. But if you watch something enough times, you can learn it. Might this have application to education? You bet. This is what I mean by student time-on-task.

And finally, Ron Edmonds' last mark of an effective school: *frequent monitoring of student progress*. Student levels of achievement must be assessed regularly. Classroom teachers do it weekly and monthly, and schools do it yearly. State and other government agencies should assess regularly, too. I do not have to tell you what people have said about tests and how terrible they are, because they "reduce people to scores," and so on.

A safe and orderly environment, clear and focussed academic mission, instructional leadership, high expectations, student time-on-task, and frequent monitoring of progress: these are some of the necessary conditions of a good school. We are just now completing a disastrous 25-year social experiment that proves that if you trash the necessary conditions for effective schools, you get trashy results. If anyone doubts this, they should look at schools that work and look closely at why they work. They will find the presence of solid values, traditional teaching practices, and the conditions I have mentioned.

By the way, if you think this cultural deconstruction did not have to do with peoples' receptiveness to the liberal criticisms of traditional school practice, take a look at a place where some of the

same arguments were advanced but did not take hold. Take a look at sports. Chip Oliver of the then Oakland Raiders wrote a book in the early '70s basically saying football players should not keep score anymore, should all be in the huddle together, should all eat brown rice and perform the "dance" of football. Now, when coaches heard this, they said, "What the hell is he talking about?" But when people in the National Education Association and other parts of the education establishment heard the education version of this stuff they said, "It makes sense to us. Let's give it a try." The coaches lacked the pretentiousness to buy into it; they just said it sounds stupid. And they were right.

As a result, American sports performance is at its best ever. I still watch the Gonzaga College High School football team and compare it to the one I played on thirty years ago, when we were the city championship team. The current team would have beat our brains out. They are better than we were. Obviously, things like equipment and training are better. But equipment and training are better for education, too. Sports performance has improved because coaches did not stop doing the right things or stop having high expectations. They did not ask, "Let's see, who will be coach today?" They did not say to their players, "I thought it was a bad block. What kind of a block did *you* think it was?" They did what they were supposed to do: they coached. And the kids have gotten better. Today more kids are fit and the level of performance in almost every sport is the best ever, because coaches insist on holding to high standards.

Remade Institutions. Unfortunately, the news is not so good on other fronts. The work of cultural deconstruction has gone on in many of our institutions—schools, colleges and universities, mainline churches, the media, the legal profession and others. For the most part, then, our public sector institutions have borne the brunt of the cultural deconstruction. The assault was made primarily by people who held left-liberal political views, who believed that these institutions were corrupt, unsuitable, unworthy and unfit, and so they decided to remake them in their image. Michael Barone, editor of the *Almanac of American Politics*, puts it this way:

The public sector institutions in which liberals have had custody for the last 20 years—the public schools, central city bureaucracies, university governance—have performed poorly. The people in charge of them have a million excuses: they have a poor quality of students or constituents, they don't have enough money, they must do things according to certain rules and regulations because of internal institutional imperatives. These are the same excuses the military made 15 or 20 years ago... the leaders of liberal public sector institutions are continuing to make excuses...

The returns are in, and they are not good in terms of liberal tutelage of our institutions. The liberal emperor has been shown not to have any clothes. However—and this is the interesting thing and one of our great political challenge, it seems to me—while the emperor may not have any clothes, he still has an empire. He is still running the institutions. Contemporary liberalism has been intellectually and empirically discredited. Today hardly anybody wants to be known as a liberal. And yet, if you look at the institutions I have mentioned, you can demonstrate quite clearly, through research and common sense, that they still tend to be guided by a liberal ideology.

So there is a great and important political task ahead for us. I am not speaking here of the task of electing a conservative President or a conservative Congress (although that is certainly important.) What is critical is the task of *regaining our institutions*—and regaining our institutions not to then subject them to a narrow or rigid conservative ideology, but to let these institutions be governed by what works, by what makes sense, and by insisting that they remain true to their original pur-

pose. That is part of what we should be talking about when we talk about culture: how to reform our institutions so they serve the purposes for which they were intended.

War to the Death. Midge Decter, one of the most insightful cultural commentators in America, has reminded us that if you are going to get in a fight about the culture, be ready for a really tough battle. Just because it is called "culture" does not mean that it will involve a polite discussion over tea and finger sandwiches. As Decter writes, "A culture war is a war to the death. For a culture war is not a battle over policy, though policy in many cases gives it expression; it is rather a battle about matters of the spirit." What is the result of the culture war? Why does it matter who wins? Because whoever wins the culture war gets to teach the children.

The good news is that people are now recognizing that the cultural agenda is critically important. It is time that conservatives address cultural issues in a direct, succinct, understandable way and in a tone that is upbeat, affirming, and confident. The novelist Tom Wolfe has said that the '90s will be the decade of the debate about culture and values. There are signs everywhere that confirm this: government reports, new publications, poll data, and attitudes in general. There is even something columnist Suzanne Fields has called the "new familism." All of a sudden everyone, including liberals, is re-discovering the importance of the nuclear family. And in another sign of the times, Morton Kondracke of *The New Republic* confessed recently to being a prude because he thought people ought to have *some* restraints on their sexual activities.

We should not underestimate the difficulty of the challenge. Because people recognize that culture is a matter of importance does not mean that all the questions will be resolved in the right way. These are tough matters. These can be deeply controversial matters. They go to the heart and soul of a nation. But I believe the subject is well worth exploring. I think that we are at the right time to do it because, to cite another phrase of Tom Wolfe's, the "great relearning" has begun. We have begun to relearn some of things we forgot over the last 25 years. I would like to thank The Heritage Foundation for the opportunity to explore these issues. I promise you we will take it seriously and I will try to make it as interesting and worthwhile as I can.

