

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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A Strategy for
Transforming
America's
Culture

By William J. Bennett



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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
U.S.A.
202/546-4400

A Strategy for Transforming America's Culture

By William J. Bennett

When I talked to many of you last December, it was about the spiritual, moral, and political problems of our country. Let me briefly summarize what I said then. Current trends in out-of-wedlock births, crime, drug use, family decomposition, and educational decline, as well as a host of other social pathologies, are incompatible with the continuation of American society as we know it. If these things continue, the republic as we know it will cease to be. The trends are dangerous and they are potentially catastrophic. That is the hard truth of our time—and I believe it needs to be said.

I am very pleased with the response to the speech. Adam Meyerson did his typically great job in editing it for *Policy Review*. We got a wonderful response from many distinguished people, and it has generated a fair amount of discussion. The questions that I have been asked most often about it are, “Are you that pessimistic? And, do you think we can pull it out of the fire?” The answer to both is yes.

I am that pessimistic; I think things are very serious. But I also think that we can pull it out of the fire, primarily because there is such a thing as the American capacity for self-renewal, and because we have faced and overcome enormous challenges before. But in many ways, this one is different. This is about the soul of the country. But yes, I believe we can overcome this too.

Ed Feulner asked me to briefly lay out a strategy of how we accomplish that. These are just my preliminary thoughts on it. I eventually want to turn that speech, and these thoughts, into a book. And I will draw from the very intelligent comments made during the last two days by people like Midge Decter, Mike Joyce, Bob Woodson, Charles Murray, and the others. There is an awful lot of wisdom to gain from these individuals.

There are several things, it seems to me, that we need to do. The first thing is to decentralize. This is something that Charles Murray and others have spoken eloquently about, and it is a point about government. We have to get functions away from the federal government and return them to other, local levels of government, and return many responsibilities back to individuals and social institutions.

Our friend Bruce Herschensohn made the devolution of government a big theme during his 1992 Senate campaign—his great, but unfortunately losing, campaign—in California. To the degree that we can, we should bring government back to the people. Let me be clear: what the federal government ought to do, it should do. But the rest should be done at the local level, and by smaller departments and agencies of government. We should advance the idea of federalism.

If the people in the state of California want bilingual education and they vote for it, then let them have it. But there is no reason to impose upon the rest of the nation some absurd uniform standards about bilingual education—particularly when most people, whether they are Latino or

William J. Bennett is a Distinguished Fellow at The Heritage Foundation.

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not, think it is a mess. We should get Washington out of that business, and return more authority to the states.

What the federal government is responsible for is to protect the citizenry from invasion, to maintain a militia. It should do what it has promised to do, which is to protect us, and to keep us safe and secure in our lives. That, after all, is the first responsibility of government. I would suggest a new theory of government—a new beginning, if you will. We should go back to the Constitution and say, “When you, the federal government, have taken care of your solemn obligation to protect us not just from enemies abroad but enemies at home, then we will decide whether to give you other responsibilities, such as regulating the market place. Until you do first things first, we will not give you any more to do, and we are going to take your power and give it to the states and local governments.”

It seems to me that the essential argument the Republican Party should make in 1994 and beyond is to say to the federal government, “We want our money back—and with it our sense of responsibility. It is time—it is past time—that this society understand again that people need to take responsibility for their lives.”

Notice that this message is the direct opposite of what the current administration believes. The Clinton Administration is saying, in effect: “Give us everything and we will take care of you, cradle to grave. We will take care of your health care; your education; your day care; your midnight basketball; your children. We will take care of everything.” In response we should say, “We have had enough of being taken care of.” Because our own sense of responsibility, the sense of responsibility of many Americans, is becoming attenuated. And that can destroy a self-governing republic.

With centralization comes localization. Last night Mayor Schundler provided us with a very poignant example of how he cannot adjudicate and mediate a circumstance involving his community, his police officers, and his citizens because of regulations at the state level. This is the same reason the National Education Association wants to lobby on the federal level, in order to lock in the rules so that there is no local flexibility. But we know that if a police force is good, or a school is good, or a welfare system is working effectively, it is not because of the federal government. It is because of the intelligence, drive, and creativity of the people on the ground.

People used to ask me about the best federal education program we have. The first thing I said in response was that we really don't need a Department of Education. We were educating kids better before we had a Department of Education. The best dollar that goes from the federal government is the dollar that goes to somebody who knows what he is doing. And too many of the dollars go to people who don't know what they are doing. The question we need to ask is: why do we have to pass the dollars from the states and locales to Washington and back out again? So that Congress and the bureaucracy can take their cut. An evaluation asked the people who were getting federal grants in the schools, what the best program was in the Department of Education. They said it was Chapter 2. Now Chapter 2 is block grants to the states. They send us the money, we send it back. They said that was the best program. That's right, because they can figure out—at least some of them—what to do at the local level. And if they can't figure it out, let the local citizenry figure it out and tell them. Why are the New Hampshire test scores always near the top? Because half of the education dollar in New Hampshire is raised at the local level. And if they are going to hire an assistant football coach or another math teacher in New Hampshire communities, they still have town meetings about it. The closer something is to the people, the better it is. If we de-centralize and localize, we will be doing a lot better. Part of this, of course, is a change of mind. It is seeing ourselves again as self-governing people, as autonomous people and not people who are entirely dependent on the federal government.

Jefferson said, "Dependence begets servitude." And, boy, have we seen that in the last 25 years. I said to many of you before, that the signal moment of the presidential election was in Richmond when the man with the ponytail stood up and said, in effect, "You three are running for President, and one of you will be President. We are your children. What will you do to meet our needs, to take care of us?" This event occurred in Richmond—not very many miles from where Madison and Jefferson are buried (if they are still there; that is, if they didn't get up and just run and say what a disaster this has become).

More troubling than the question was that none of the candidates—not George Bush, not Ross Perot, and certainly not Bill Clinton—challenged the premise of the question. It would have been refreshing if just one of them had said in response, "I am not your father; I'm not your priest; I'm not your rabbi. I am only running to be head of the federal government. This is America, a do-it-yourself society. Satisfy your own needs. Take care of yourself. Get a hold of your life, man."

I believe this increasing sense of dependence is one of the most important things which we have to change. If something, anything is wrong in our lives, the automatic reflex is to call on the federal government. If Johnny has a toothache, call the federal government. Every bureaucrat, every local person on the dole, anywhere in the United States now thinks of some new federal program to put into place. It is that mindset which we must change. This is more than a distribution of power; it is a distribution of responsibility. If one or two more generations get used to not taking care of themselves, but continue to insist on being taken care of, then I am afraid that the prognosis isn't good. The sense of personal responsibility is the linchpin. That is the central thing that we have to recover.

The key to localizing is to give people more authority over their own lives. When I was at Williams College in 1962-63, the left said we ought to give people the power to make decisions that affect their own lives. The left doesn't see that anymore; many Democrats don't believe that anymore. Conservatives say that; let people choose their schools and their health care, for example. This is a self-governing society, and that is the point. And, yes, there is some risk to a self-governing society. But there is also tremendous opportunity.

In addition to trying to decentralize and localize, we want to "incentivize." Bob Woodson talked about the incentives in society being wrong. How did Bob put it the other day? Government is saying to young girls, "If you don't have a job and you aren't married to a guy who has a job, and you make sure that you don't get married to somebody responsible, then we've got a deal for you. We'll give you some money. But first, have a baby. Go ahead and have a baby, but be sure not to get married."

William Raspberry cited some figures the other day. A recent study compared two groups of Americans: those who finished high school, got married, and reached age 20 before having their first child, and those who didn't. Of the children of those in the first group, only eight percent live in poverty. Eight percent. In the second group, the poverty rate was 79 percent. It is not too much to ask people to finish high school and hold off having babies until they are twenty and get married. But in our time, it seems to be an awful lot to ask. The mindset and the incentives are all wrong.

The incentives in the criminal justice system are all wrong as well. We've got to turn those around. We say to children, "Crime doesn't pay." But many kids in our cities look out and say that crime does pay—and even if you get caught, it pays. When I was "drug czar," I was often asked why these kids should take an honest job at McDonald's when they can make so much more money selling drugs. There are, as a matter of fact, a lot of good answers to that. For example, the chances that they will have a long life in the second job are not very great. Working

conditions are not terrific. A lot of these kids get their kneecaps busted, and they get shot. If one wants to appeal to modern temperament, there is no health insurance in that market; you don't get any benefits. And there is another reason: one job is legitimate and the other one isn't. One job a person can be proud of, and the other one a person cannot be proud of. But to make that real, to make that palpable, we need to have the incentives.

We have to reward good behavior and stop rewarding bad behavior. And in the criminal justice system we have to have certain punishment. I for one (and I realize many of you may differ) would be prepared to change what has been a big issue for Republicans in criminal law, which is to add more and more crimes to the capital punishment list. I am in favor of capital punishment. I think in certain instances it is deserved. But right now what we need much more than severe punishment is certain punishment. Everyone who commits a crime has to know that they are going to be punished for sure and that it gets longer each time. I would prefer that to getting tied up in the debates about capital punishment, particularly given all of the appeals involved in the process. People have to know that if they commit a crime, the odds that they are going to jail are very good.

We need to reconstitute the family. Here I am indebted to a person whom many of you have supported, David Murray, a brilliant young cultural anthropologist. He has the lead article in the Spring issue of *Policy Review*, "Poor, Suffering Bastards." It is about bastards, marriage and the family. It is a brilliant piece of work. Murray reminds us of a very simple fact: no society has survived that lost its families. No society has made it that gave up on families. Where families fall apart, societies fall apart. We do not know a better way to do it. This article is one very much worth reading. He points out a wonderful distinction that is very apt for our time. There are two Latin words for father—*pater* and *genitor*. A *genitor* sires children. *Genitor* is about having the capacity to impregnate a woman. On the *genitor* front we are very strong in America. But there is another definition of father—*pater*. A *pater* takes responsibility for the child and says "This is my child. You are my child and I take responsibility for you. I claim you. You have my name. I introduce you now as son or daughter to the world." That is what fathers have done for a long time. But many children in our time do not have fathers at all. They have *genitors* but they do not have *paters*.

We need to make marriage the institution through which all rights and all obligations are exercised. David Murray points out what an extraordinary thing marriage is. Through it, you get involved in a network of people that you otherwise would not. It just would not happen. He calls it the "complicated wiring" of marriage. I know of what I speak. We are a mixed marriage. I came from Brooklyn and my wife Elayne is from South Carolina via Charlotte, North Carolina. When we got married I introduced her to my brother, to my step-mother, to one or two other people. Elayne introduced me to three or four hundred people who were my cousins. They were all over, and everywhere.

The cry in the late 1960s was what difference does that piece of paper make? If we love each other, what difference does it make? Consider yourself as the father of a daughter who lives with a man outside of marriage. How would you think of that man and your obligations to him—particularly compared to the man who lives with your daughter who is her husband. The odds are you probably don't even like the first guy—at least, part of you wouldn't. The second man is one whom you are prepared to do a lot for: money, help, contacts, lunch, and many other things. When he needs you, you will more often than not be there because he is connected by family. What he is really connected by is a commitment symbolized by that piece of paper.

As a society we have to talk about the family—and we have to do so in the right way and in an honest way. We should not talk about family as if they are wonderful all of the time. As many of us know, if you do gather with two or three hundred of your closest relatives for three or four

days over Christmas, sometimes you want to get back to work. Family is not, and has never been, an unconditional blessing. There are times when it is a trying thing, and we all know that. But we also know that there are some blessings that society and civilization cannot achieve any other way. One wonderful phrase of David Murray's is that the child is the "ultimate undocumented alien." The absence of a father means that child very often remains undocumented. The presence of the father gives that child a stake and a document. That is why it is important.

We also need to talk about the family in specific terms—things like changing the tax laws to be family-friendly; having conversations with the media about the messages they send; standing up for things like easing the restrictions on adoption and (I realize that some will disagree with me) opposing homosexual adoption. We need to speak about the family as a unique and special institution, one which performs a function in this society which no other institution can. The family, as our friend Michael Novak has said, is "the first, best and original department of health, education and welfare."

"Recentering" the family means looking at the divorce laws as well. In the view of modern society, marriage has gone from a sacrament, to a commitment, to a convenience. We had better take a serious look at this, and perhaps put an end to things like "no-fault" divorce. A friend of mine says, "I can change the whole pattern of divorce in a minute. All you've got to do is just say for the next five years, custody of the children automatically goes to the fathers. Men will have to raise all those children, so that will slow down the divorce rate more than anything in this country." In many cases, I think it will, but certainly not in all. The sad fact is that in many parts of our society, fathers who care about their children are in diminishing supply. One of the interesting groups organizing now is the National Fatherhood Initiative, headed by David Blankenhorn, Don Eberly, and others.

One very interesting piece of research that knocked Elayne and me over when we heard it this summer, is that children who grow up without fathers, whose fathers are killed in war, in the line of duty, or in an accident, essentially are identical to children who have their fathers with them through adulthood, in this respect: the father is often an important, uplifting figure in their lives. What is still thought sacred is the idea of fatherhood, knowing that at least there is, or was, a man who cared for you and who wanted the best for you. Fathers are remembered, sometimes reconstructed, after death by mothers who say, "Your father would not want you to do this, and you remember what your father meant to you." This is much different from what happens to children who never have fathers, or whose fathers leave them. And it is the idea of fatherhood that we are losing as a culture.

This morning, during a panel discussion, I said that little boys want to be men. The thing is, they just don't begin life by knowing what it means to be a man. One of the things we have to show them is what it means to be a man, that to be a man means more—a lot more—and something very different than, just being able to impregnate. It means willingness to accept and take responsibility.

Another thing we need to do is lionize. What do I mean by lionize? I mean exactly what Bob Woodson was talking about this afternoon. We need to advertise our successes. *Policy Review*, for example, often publishes articles which profile a hero. In this last issue we read about Victor Trevino, who is a police constable in Houston and has a volunteer police department. We have seen profiles of my friend Reuben Greenberg, the police chief of Charleston. Bob said, and I think he's right, that for every one of our problems we can find somebody out there who, with grit and determination, has done something about it. We need to tell their stories, but we also need to lionize them, to hold them up as examples. Perhaps we could have a Heroes of Heritage group, and bring them to a meeting like this so we can salute the people who are fighting hard for the things which we believe in.

When I referred to schools that succeeded when I was Secretary of Education, people often asked, “Why are you doing this? Why aren’t you talking more about the problems and failures?” I said, “If we focus on the failures we are going to get more failures. If we focus on successes and show people they can do it, and that they can do it through the exercise of the good old values, we may get more successes.” So let’s lionize; let’s show the world; let’s light candles and put a spotlight on our heroes. I think it would be very good for Heritage. It was St. Paul who wrote, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.”

And finally, we need to “spiritualize.” The (spiritual) question we need to answer is, who are we? What do we think we are? One of the reasons that we have had so many social problems during the last quarter-century is because the philosophy that motivates a lot of Americans has changed.

Now most people don’t pursue philosophy in an active sense. They just sort of take in what is around them, and they proceed. But I submit to you that thirty years ago everybody knew that the purpose of education was the moral and intellectual development of the young. We attended to the moral because we believed children to be moral and spiritual beings, made in the image of God.

I am always embarrassing the National Education Association by holding up their documents from the 1950s which support the ideal of moral and intellectual development, about the importance of teachers being good role models, and which stated that the ultimate responsibility of the teacher is to be a good example to the young.

Many of these things we regard as ancient history. But are they so ancient? This was only thirty years ago, and yet it was understood by everyone involved in education that yes, we were involved in helping children to become smarter, but we were also committed to making them better; we were engaged in the architecture of the soul. And now we have debased the language and idea of education, in which teachers often talk about themselves as people who are engaged in “skills acquisition” and teaching children “self-esteem.” Teachers are not engaged in “skills acquisition,” they are engaged in the task of shaping souls, of shaping young lives. That is what true education is about.

So, we have to come clean; we have to remember; we have to recall who we are—and then we have to adjust our behavior on that basis. Are we spiritual beings, or not? Let me be specific: when we look at sex education programs, how do we talk to girls? Mike Joyce made a wonderful point earlier today in his Marian Wright Edelman example. He said they believe in “absolutely no guns but safe sex.” If guns are such a problem, why don’t we have a program in gun safety at school? There are lots of reasons, but one reason is that people in the schools will have nothing to do with guns. Why can’t they have the same kind of attitude about unwed teenage sex and about unwed teenage pregnancy?

By the way, I flipped around the channels on television last night and I saw three programs on smoking and smokers. *Time* magazine has a cover story on it. Everybody is after the smoker. As one of America’s famous reformed smokers, I’m glad that battle is over. But, my gosh, could we put some similar energy into some other campaign? Could we all start asking people to let us have a national campaign mounted against unwed teenage pregnancy. After all, we can cite destructive consequences and we can point to programs which work—Elayne Bennett’s “Best Friends” abstinence program for girls and other programs.

It is not inevitable that children will be sexually promiscuous. And we can look at the consequences of what follows. At the end of the day—I found this out in the drug czar job—behavior

follows attitude. And attitude follows beliefs. It was Aristotle who told us that what a child has been taught to believe from youth makes not a little difference, not some difference, but all the difference.

I believe that thirty years ago, the philosophy of life actually closer to people's hearts was the philosophy of the two great commandments: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, thy whole soul, thy whole mind. And second, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Of course some people didn't agree with this and people who did fell short. But we, as a people, came together around that view and embraced that view. Most of us believed it—and most tried to live up to it.

What is the philosophy today? For a large part of the population, particularly our young people, I think the modern philosophy is captured by three simple words. It is an advertisement, maybe the most popular advertisement out there: "Just do it." Does it make any difference if twenty or thirty million people are running around the country who believe the purpose of life is the great commandment or, on the other hand, if they believe the purpose of life is to "just do it?" The transition point (and this may be cheap sociology, in my view) is the Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company ad of the 1960s. Do you remember what it said—this bridge between theology and the popular culture? It said, "You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can." Now Schlitz makes fine beer—I've had a few myself—but how do they know we only go around once? Where did that view come from? Why not, "You only go around once, so live your life with dignity, with honor and die well-thought-of by your fellow men," which is something the Romans might have said.

The Book of Virtues has gotten an amazing response from little boys from stories like Horatius at the Bridge and the Pass of Thermopylae. I ask our son John, "What do you want to read?" He says, "Read me one of those Greek or Roman stories." When I studied Latin as a child we read all of those stories, and the vocabulary lessons were about honor and valor. There's an interesting word. I used the word "valor" on a talk show the other night and I thought they were going to pass out. I made an argument about gays in the military, and I said that apart from destroying morale, it is destroying the image of men that we want boys to have. We want strong men of valor.

A second word I used was "inhibit." We have to have proper respect for the inhibition of one's impulses, and this had not occurred to the interviewer. All of Western civilization has been built on inhibition, that you have to inhibit some things at least sometimes. But there are people abroad in our society in positions of influence who are not sure we should ever inhibit. That is extraordinary.

As I said, what this finally turns on is a philosophy of life. But for those of us who believe, who look at our children and see something very precious—it seems to me that is where we make our stand.

A lot of people have asked me, "What is the significance of the success of *The Book of Virtues*?" I'm not sure I know, but I am very encouraged. It has been wonderful for us, and it has started a discussion itself about what is going on in the country. Last week *The Book of Virtues*, which has been out for 15 weeks, outsold Howard Stern 5 to 1. It outsold Howard Stern and Roseanne combined 3 to 1—to which a friend of mine said, "Now there's a scary thought—Howard Stern and Roseanne combined." Something is going on, something is stirring. Perhaps we are on the edge of that revival.

I do know this: if this republic is to prevail, if our ideas and ideals are to prevail, it will not be because of some historical and determinant forces. It will be because of our effort. Justice Holmes once said, "The mode in which the inevitable comes to pass is effort." And it is through the

efforts of The Heritage Foundation and the efforts of a lot of people that I think will make the difference.

A few brief closing thoughts. As we join the battle, be of good cheer. The fight for our children and our culture is a fight worth being in. I thought Bob Woodson's presentation was wonderful not only for its religious and moral depth and the practicality of his stories, but because of his good cheer. The mood of the country very often wants to be darker. Lots of people think it is sophisticated to be darker, to be down, to be maudlin. College students certainly think so. I remember when I was a college student, I put on a black turtleneck and quoted French poetry—specifically, Baudelaire—all the time. I remember one thing he wrote: "Life is a hospital, in which each patient believes he will be better if he is moved to another bed." This is all very French, very fashionable, very *New Yorker*, and it appeals to undergraduates. It was the sort of thing you said to a Bennington girl in hopes that you would persuade her you were more than a big-lug of a football player. But we should do better. We should be of good cheer. There is a distinction between theoretical pessimism and practical optimism. Theoretical pessimism is found in the book of Isaiah. And I guess I am something of a theoretical pessimist—that is, in the end it is all wind and ashes, all our institutions, everything. But practical optimism is getting up in the morning thinking how you can improve things. There's a funny story that Irving Kristol once told (during the Cold War), about Soviet generals who get up and, while they are shaving, they are looking in the mirror and ask, "How can we hurt the U.S. today?" We need to be doing something similar on our side, but instead of destroying things. What the people at Heritage do when they wake up in the morning is to ask, "What can we do today to advance the agenda? What can we do today to move the ball?" And amazingly, the ball can move sometimes and it is quite extraordinary.

Everybody has to find their own place, their own point of attack, their own valued place to stand. And, I think when you talk to young people about this it is worth keeping in mind a line from Wordsworth, "What we have loved, others will love, but we must teach them how." Students tell me that they want to major in government, and I always tell them not to major in government but to major in classics, literature, history.

A second thing I say is do what you know and do what you love, and expand what you know and expand what you love. In thinking about moving the ball for our side, think of what you know and love and expand it. One of my favorite lines in one of my favorite movies, *Chariots of Fire*, is when they ask the great British runner Eric Liddle, "Why do you run?" He said, "Because when I run I feel God's pleasure." This man was a wonderful runner. You remember the story of the two runners. One runs, and he has to work to run and he runs to justify his existence. It's work, it's exercise. But the other, Eric Liddle, is a natural runner. When he runs, he feels God's pleasure. And we should feel God's pleasure, too.

And the last thing I want to say is, how we get there depends a lot on our hearts and on our encouragements. And I want to close tonight and this very special weekend by recalling Aristotle on friendship. Aristotle says there are three kinds of friendship. There are friendships we have because people give us pleasure. They make us laugh. They are engaging, and that is a good kind of friendship.

A second kind of friendship is one utility. They are people who are useful to us, who help us to get jobs, lend us rakes, fix power mowers, and do other things that we cannot do so well. Many of our neighbors fall into this group.

But there is a third kind of friendship, friendship in the good. That is based on the pursuit of a common aim, and it is larger than the two friends themselves. It lifts people to another level, to live for something beyond the purview of one's own life. And Aristotle says this kind of friend-

ship is the best because in it, one is friends for a larger, common purpose. It encourages us about life generally, and it ennobles us. This is the friendship of the admirable. This is the friendship where one seeks out another person because their company makes you better for having been there. And that is the kind of common company and common cause that we make up here. That, it seems to me, is why these meetings are so special, and that is the kind of encouragement—combined with the other kinds of encouragement that I get at home, that I get at church, and that I get elsewhere—that keeps a lot of us in the fight



