
Book Reviews

William Bennett bares his cultural depravity

by Marianna Wertz

The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators: Facts and Figures on the State of American Society

by William J. Bennett
Touchstone, New York, 1994
138 pages, paperbound, \$8.95

Without intending to do so, William Bennett's *Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* reveals, as in a looking glass, all the ugliness of the "culture" that informed the Reagan and Bush administrations. The book is intended to be an indictment of American "culture" today, and has been greeted as such by all the leading neo-con celebrities, including talk-show superstar Rush Limbaugh, whose praise embellishes the front cover (giving it the definitive neo-con imprimatur).

Bennett is one of the most likely contenders for the Republican presidential nomination for 1996, and says he will decide at summer's end whether to throw his hat in the ring. As former drug policy chief and education secretary to Ronald Reagan, Bennett has all the politically correct associations to be neo-con President *cum laude*: He is currently a co-director (with Jack Kemp and Jeane Kirkpatrick) of Empower America; he is a Distinguished Fellow, Cultural Policy Studies, at the Heritage Foundation; and he is a senior editor of Bill Buckley's *National Review*.

The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators has as much to do with real culture as Nancy Reagan's astrologer had to do with science. It is a compilation of graphs, charts, and salient quotations about five areas of American life: crime, family and children, pathologies and behavior of youth, education, and popular culture and religion. While the book accurately charts the decline into barbarism and illiteracy in the nation since 1960, nowhere is the reader presented with a *positive* concept of culture or an adequate explanation of why this decline occurred. For example, in the section on popular culture, one might hope at last, after wading through more

than 100 pages of statistics on the destruction of the nation's youth, to be presented with some solutions, or at least a real critique of popular culture. Instead, the reader learns the number of sexual references and violent episodes that play each 24-hour period on television; he learns how destructive rock music is; and how many eschatological references there are on the 2-Live Crew album "Nasty as They Wanna Be."

The only hint in the whole book that Bennett actually has an idea about what constitutes positive culture is a quote from Plato's *Republic* in the chapter on popular culture. Bennett quotes Plato: "Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace." But of Plato's writings on the hypothesis of the higher hypothesis—which laid the basis for the Golden Renaissance—we hear nothing.

'The underclass'

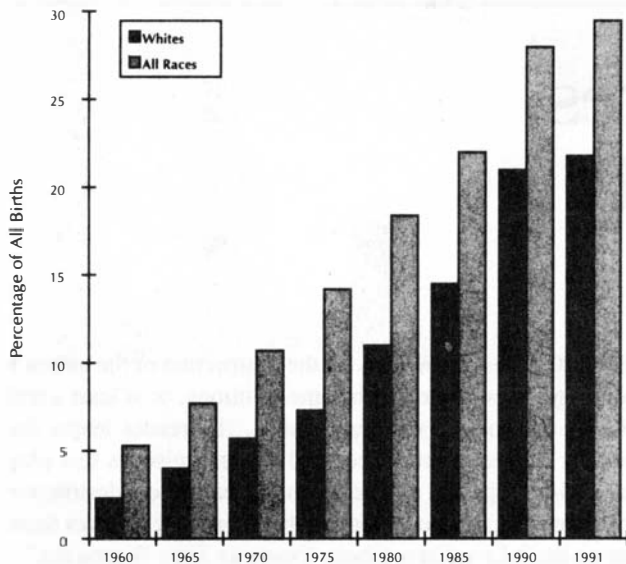
However, Bennett does not altogether avoid trying to find a solution to the problems he describes. In his introduction, the only part of the book actually written by Bennett, he offers some ideas for what "politics in general, and government in particular, can do to encourage cultural renewal."

First, he says, "government should heed the old injunction, 'Do no harm.' Over the years the government has often done unintended harm to many of the people it was trying to help. There are intrinsic flaws in some programs. This is particularly, though by no means exclusively, true of programs aimed at assisting the underclass."

The underclass! Since when does America have an *underclass*? In the section on "Family and Children," Bennett quotes Myron Magnet, author of *The Dream and the Nightmare*, "What makes the underclass different not just from you but also from the majority of the poor both today and in the past is its self-defeating behavior and the worldview from which that behavior springs. . . . The underclass is equipped with different, and sparser, mental and emotional furniture, unhelpful for taking advantage of the economic opportunities that American life offers."

There it is: Social Darwinism in its full glory. If you can't

FIGURE 1
Illegitimate births



Source: National Center for Health Statistics

Since 1960, illegitimate birth rates have increased more than 400%.

make it in the competitive jungle called “American life,” it’s your fault, because you’re “different.”

Bennett describes this “underclass” implicitly in the “indicators” he presents in the section on “Crime”:

The number of hard-core addicts remains relatively constant; approximately 25% of drug users consume 75% of all illegal drugs; the violent crime arrest rate for African-American youth is five times higher than that for white youth; blacks make up about 12% of the population, and account for about 45% of all violent criminal offenders; the vast majority of violent crimes against blacks were committed by other blacks.

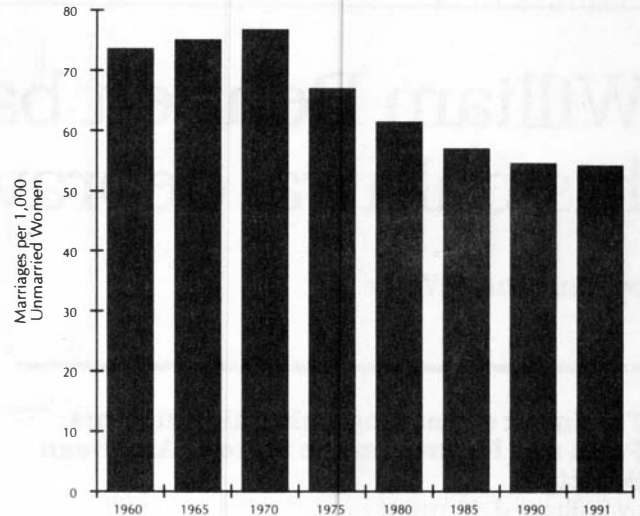
And what does Bennett propose to do with this “underclass”? In his introduction, he endorses the following “reform-minded and thoughtful legislative social agenda” as his “cultural renewal program”:

1) “A more effective and tough-minded criminal justice system, including more prisons, judges, and prosecutors; a reform of the juvenile criminal justice system (including trying as adults juveniles who commit certain violent crimes); increased attention to victims’ rights and roles in the criminal justice process; reform of parole; enactment of ‘truth in sentencing’ guidelines (ensuring that convicted criminals serve, at minimum, half their sentence). . . .”

2) A “radical reform of education” which focuses on privatization and vouchers.

3) Ending welfare payments at a “certain date” and re-

FIGURE 2
Marriage rates



Source: National Center for Health Statistics

The rate at which people are getting married is more than 2.5% lower than in 1960.

quiring “welfare mothers with older children to contribute community service in exchange for benefits received.”

4) “Removal of the economic barriers that keep the underclass in poverty by providing tax incentives for business to locate in urban enterprise zones, tenant ownership, and investment in low-income housing.”

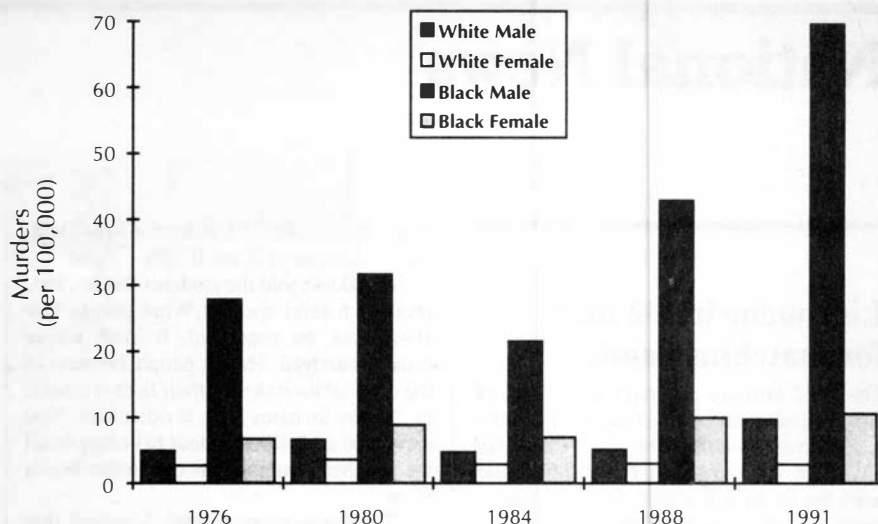
And the list goes on. Bill Bennett’s “solution” is slave labor in a police state.

As I indicated at the beginning, the book is, unwittingly, a mirror of the *fact* that many of the problems Bennett identifies were either caused or exacerbated by the policies of the administrations with which he was associated. In fact, it’s hard to believe that he could publish some of the material, as it’s an indictment in black and white of the decay in the American people wrought by the Reagan-Bush administrations’ years of self-indulgent neglect.

Admittedly, it didn’t start with Reagan and Bush. It started with the “post-industrial” society policies implemented following the assassination of President Kennedy, as Bennett’s charts amply demonstrate. But the neo-con policies implemented under the 12 years of Reagan-Bush accelerated the decay of the nation, looting it of whatever wealth remained after the industry was gone, to swell the bubble of speculative wealth that is bursting apart so visibly today.

Refer to the three charts published here as an example. The first is an index of marriage rates from 1960 to 1991. The second is an index of illegitimate births for the same period. Ronald Reagan was President from 1980 to 1988, and George Bush was President from 1988 to 1992, while

FIGURE 3
**Murder rates for juveniles
 ages 10 to 17**



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics

the American family was being decimated. The third gives murder rates for juveniles from 1976 to 1991. It was under these administrations that the current plague of crime among black youth skyrocketed. Bennett doesn't discuss this obvious irony because he is blind to the effect of the neo-con policy on actual human beings. He prefers to place the blame on "big-spending liberals" and the "decline in morality." It is certainly true that "big-spending liberals" have caused immense damage, and that morality has declined to virtually nil. But Bennett's "medicine" would simply kill the patient.

The true issue is economics

The real problem with Bennett's analysis can best be seen in his treatment of economic issues, in his appendix on "Social Spending and Economic Growth." Bennett's economic analysis is as far from reality as the Reagan "economic boom," which is now getting ready to blow out the entire world economy through the collapse of the derivatives market. The indices he charts in this section are: total social spending; means-tested welfare spending; federal tax burden on families with children; charitable contributions; percentage of population owning homes; GDP growth; percentage of households owning automobiles.

What can be learned from these indices is how well or poorly the "service economy" has fared since 1960.

What can't be learned is *why our nation is going to hell*. Bennett never seeks the figures on industrial plant closures, real unemployment, shutdown of energy production, collapse of infrastructure, destruction of transport systems. If he really wanted to know why our nation's youth are turning to crime, drugs and rock music, he would seek the answer in the real economic indicators. And he would learn that the "underclass" is simply the human refuse of a decaying economy, which has been bled dry by the speculators unleashed by his neo-con friends.

The parents of the "underclass" used to be productively

employed at places such as General Motors and U.S. Steel. They used to be mechanics at some of the myriad airlines now shut down by the 1980s deregulation and hostile takeover frenzy. They used to build and repair the roads and bridges that are decaying beneath us today.

Friedrich Schiller, one of the greatest writers on the question of culture in human history, said that if you just give man bread, the rest will follow of its own accord. Our culture is dying because our economy is dying. As most Americans fight each other for fewer and fewer jobs, is it any wonder that their children see the life of the drug-pusher as an easier way out? If Michael Milken can make billions on Wall Street, why shouldn't a teen make thousands gambling on drug deals?

The "opportunities" offered by Bill Bennett's America—to get rich by destroying your neighbor—are precisely what our youth are trying to seize, in their own perverted way. The answer is neither to justify their behavior nor to lock them up in prison forever. The answer is to change *our* behavior and the values we communicate to them.

That is where true culture comes in. It is in studying the works of the greatest minds of western Christian culture—Plato, St. Augustine, Nicolaus of Cusa, Leonardo da Vinci, J.S. Bach, W.A. Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, to name a few—that we can begin to understand what a culture worthy of man *in the image of the living God* really is.

The leading cultural indicators that measure real culture would have to ask such questions as how well attended are Classical music concerts, how many people went to a museum in any given year, how many play an instrument, how many wrote an original piece of music or a poem. Or, better yet, how many joined a picket line to shut down outcome-based education, how many told their congressman to vote for nuclear power, how many voted for Lyndon LaRouche for President? From such questions we might truly learn if there is any culture left in our nation. But I wouldn't hold my breath for Bill Bennett or Rush Limbaugh to do this survey.