

DAVID HONIG: Bill Bennett Is Wrong. What Will Talk Radio Do?

E-mail to a friend | Printer friendly(October 18, 2005)

Let's start with the words, infamously broadcast on September 28, 2005. On the national platform given him by the Salem Radio Network, former Secretary of Education and self-appointed moralist Bill Bennett self-confidently uttered this:

"You could abort every black baby in this country and your crime rate would go down. That would be an impossible, ridiculous, and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down."

Bennett's contention is that Blacks are predisposed to crime from the moment of conception. Sadly, this premise is mild compared to much of what passes for intelligent discourse on talk radio. Think of Michael Graham's "Islam is a terrorist organization." And if you're a decent, God fearing American, have a paper bag handy while tuning in Michael Savage as he trades open racism, sexism and gay bashing for ad avails.

To be sure, after Bennett opined so casually about aborting "all" Black children, he gave the caveat that these abortions would be "morally reprehensible." Now he claims that he had only floated a horrible trial balloon for the purpose of shooting it down. Don't believe it. Dr. Bennett, Ph.D., had to be familiar with the well-worn rhetorical trick of planting the seed while claiming to be uninvolved. The classic example: "others have accused my political opponent of beating his spouse, and I could say that too, but such an accusation would be wrong." Sure it would.

The giveaway of what Bennett was really thinking came just two days after his radio show aired, when Bennett issued a written statement defending, as true, his declaration that "your crime rate would go down" if "all" Black babies were aborted. In only one respect was Bennett correct. Every crime needs a target, so if there were no Black people we'd have less redlining, less importation of illegal drugs, less price fixing, fewer consumer ripoffs, and fewer fake Internet sites for Katrina relief.

But Bennett wasn't talking about those crimes. He didn't mean Enron, Tyco or WorldCom. And he didn't mean consumer product deaths or white-collar embezzlement, which together cost the economy over 26 times the loss from robberies and petty thefts every year.

Throughout our history, Bennett's stereotype of intrinsic racial criminality has been the gift that keeps on giving to generations of "moralists." In the early 20th Century, racial eugenicists wielded this stereotype to advocate "trade school" educations and sterilizations for Blacks. The Klan almost never lynched anyone they couldn't accuse of some crime, real or imagined. Bennett's friend Rush Limbaugh gained popularity in 1990 by remarking that all newspaper composite pictures of wanted criminals looked like Jesse Jackson. In 1994, Time magazine admitted to darkening O.J. Simpson's mugshot on its cover.

The persistence of Bennett's stereotype, linking Blacks to crime from before birth, explains why the police search Black motorists more, why taxi drivers pass up Black passengers more, and why jurors impose longer sentences on Black defendants.

Blacks haven't been the only group defamed by "moralists" as inherently criminal. Six generations ago, Irish immigrants were their targets; three generations ago it was Italian immigrants. What the Irish and Italians had in common with African Americans was discrimination, segregation into ghettos, and inferior educational opportunities - all justified by the Big Lie of genetic predisposition to crime. As virtually all social scientists agree, street crime is spawned by poverty and discrimination, not by anything found on a chromosome.

Without a hint of irony, Bennett declared in his written statement that "[t]he issues of crime and race have been on many people's minds, and tongues, for the past month or so - in light of the situation in New Orleans[.]" How right he was. Obsessive racial stereotypes made it possible for the networks to broadcast, and for many Americans to believe tales of gross depravity - mass murders, rapes, shootings at helicopters - that almost all turned out to be fabricated.

What about Bennett's defense, in his written statement, that he had just put his "philosophy professor's hat on" to give "a thought experiment about public policy"?

Bennett's words had the Socratic form, to be sure, but superficial form isn't enough for a passing grade in Philosophy. After all, "may I beat you down, please" has the superficial form of common courtesy.

For a real thought experiment about what America would be like without Black people, recall Douglas Turner Ward's 1965 award-winning one-act play "Day of Absence." Ward conjured up a day on which Black people decided not to show up. No one around to pick the cotton, cook the food, care for the children, clean the toilets and empty the bedpans - so White America ground to a standstill and begged Blacks to please come back and make their lives bearable again. Updated for today's thespians, Ward's parable might also reveal that most Americans of all races took for granted publisher John H. Johnson, playwright August Wilson, physician Dr. Charles Drew and thousands of others who succeeded against the odds in rendering enormous commercial, literary, cultural and scientific contributions to the nation.

Or we can turn to law professor Derrick Bell's 1994 fable and thought experiment "The Space Traders," in which alien visitors promised America wealth, environmental decontamination and an alternative to fossil fuel in exchange for taking home all of America's Black people. The aliens did not disclose what they intend to do with the Black people. Yet Bell reported that significant majorities in audiences to which he's told the tale agree that if a vote were taken -- as in the fable -- the trade would be made.

Too often, "thought experiments" about the removal of minorities from America have been real. Even Abraham Lincoln advocated the deportation of Blacks to Liberia, supposedly for their own good. The government of the United States removed the Cherokees from Georgia; it allowed the importation of Chinese laborers to build the railroads and then excluded them; and it first welcomed Mexican laborers under the Bracero Program and then restricted their immigration. During World War II, the government literally removed Japanese Americans -- putting them in concentration camps. No wonder newspaper op-ed pages and the blogosphere are full of commentary from African Americans who Bennett has genuinely frightened.

So let's try another thought experiment: without Black people, what would Bill Bennett's life be like?

He'd have a difficult time driving to his job at Salem's radio network studio if Garrett Morgan hadn't invented the traffic light, or taking the subway if there had been no Albert Robinson to invent the electric trolley that spawned electrified rapid transit. Once in the

building, he'd have to climb the stairs to his office if Alexander Mills hadn't invented the elevator.

Dr. Bennett would be handwriting his Heritage Foundation commentaries if Lee Barrage hadn't invented the typewriter. He'd never write after dark if Lewis Latimer hadn't invented the electric lamp.

Not much in the way of culture would be left for Dr. Bennett to enjoy if America's theater, film, music and literature contained nothing composed, performed or influenced by African Americans.

Dr. Bennett might not feel particularly secure if the U.S. Army had to defend America without any Black officers or soldiers.

And perhaps Dr. Bennett might not sleep well at night if his country lacked equal justice for all, a gift to all Americans from Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and thousands more.

I am pointing this out not to pile on, but to suggest that reflection can change a person's way of thinking. Rather than fire Dr. Bennett, as some have urged, Salem should treat him the same way it would treat a loyal staff engineer who's unfamiliar with digital technology: send him back to school. Enroll him in a graduate research seminar on the sociology of race at Howard University. There he would dig into the empirical research that shows that job "applicants" posing on paper as "Peter" or "Emily" got 50% more callbacks from potential employers than "applicants" posing as "Tyrone" or "LaKisha." For his seminar paper, he could report on the research demonstrating that Whites - and Blacks, interestingly enough - were more likely on a video game to "shoot" a Black target whether or not he appeared to be armed.

In other words, help him grow into a wiser, better-informed human being. Let him remain a conservative if he'd like, but make him a conservative who would never stoop to racial code. Help him follow the lead of the late Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black and Senator Robert Byrd, who transcended their earlier careers to become effective advocates of racial justice.

And above all, Salem should encourage Dr. Bennett to emphasize other "virtues" besides the absence of crime. What a great day it would be if talk radio hosts campaigned to eliminate school segregation, redlining, job and housing discrimination, lack of adequate health care, and predatory lending. And how much more satisfying talk radio would be if its exponents of virtue - those aspiring to be public moralists - would shout out loud that second-class citizenship is morally wrong.

[David Honig is the Executive Director of the Minority Media and Telecommunications Council (MMTC). Founded in 1986 and based in Washington, D.C., MMTC is the nation's leading advocate for diversity in the mass media and telecom industries. dhonig@crosslink.net / www.mmtconline.org]

Speak Out

[View Comments](#) or [Post Comments](#).