



In Defense of
HYPOCRISY

*Picking Sides in the
War on Virtue*

Jeremy
Lott

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JEREMY LOTT



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To Reverend Robert Lott,
whose hypocrisies are microscopic

*You call yourself a Christian
I think that you're a hypocrite.*

MICK JAGGER

We are not hypocrites in our sleep.

WILLIAM HAZLITT

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1

BILL BENNETT'S RAP SHEET

Sounds to me like you're an opportunistic hypocritical little pudnocker.

COLONEL FLAGG

I was tipped off by an excited *Washington Monthly* hand that his low-circulation magazine was about to break a major story, jointly, with *Newsweek*. It was the spring of 2003. The subject of the exposé was former education secretary, drug czar, and *New York Times* best-selling author William Bennett.¹

The scoop was this: the author of *The Book of Virtues* had bet millions of dollars in book royalties and speaking fees at casinos in Las Vegas and Atlantic City. His preferred games of chance were video poker and high-stakes slot machines. Bennett was such a high roller that most casinos would send him a limo, put him up for a few nights on the house, and turn him loose in the high-limit rooms.

By most accounts, the casinos got a good return on their investment. Bennett would hope for digital slot machine straight flushes or wrestle with one-armed bandits into the wee hours of the morning, at a cost of \$100 to \$500 a pull. Several casinos extended lines of credit in excess of \$200,000, and those often failed to contain the damage. Internal documents reveal that, in one two-month period, Bennett was forced to wire more than \$1.4 million to cover his losses.

When he was informed that the magazines were taking the story public, Bennett agreed to talk with *Newsweek*'s Jonathan Alter. He claimed his luck was not nearly so bad as the Dorian Gray-like portrait of a nongambler might sketch after peeking at casino documents. Bennett elaborated, "You can roll up and down a lot in one day, as we have on many occasions. You may cycle several hundred thousand dollars in an evening and net out only a few thousand." In fact, he puffed up his chest and claimed that over the last decade he'd "come out fairly close to even."

That "fairly close to even" line was soon to be much mocked in the press, but Bennett soldiered on. He worked the high-limit rooms and preferred automated games of chance because he found the human alternative annoying. "When I go to the tables," he explained, "people talk—and they want to talk about politics. I don't want that. I do this for three hours to relax." Message: who could begrudge the guy a little relaxation?

Bennett argued that his behavior was not wrong for three reasons. One, he could afford it. He didn't

“play the milk money,” as he put it. He obeyed the laws, paid his taxes, reported any winnings, and flossed twice a day. Two, he didn’t lie about it, except in a genial, size-of-that-fish sort of way. The *Washington Times* had reported on his gambling in two separate stories, one about a jackpot that he hit while playing slots at the Bellagio in Las Vegas.² Three, gambling is not a sin, so long as it does not harm others.

“I’ve gambled all my life and it’s never been a moral issue with me. I liked church bingo when I was growing up. I’ve been a poker player,” Bennett told *Newsweek*. When it was put to him that gambling is a pathological addiction for some people, he denied being a problem gambler. Bennett lumped gaming into the same moral category as alcohol: “If you can’t handle it, don’t do it.”

As damage control strategies go, Bennett’s approach was sound and, for all we know, heartfelt. He came across as a regular guy who wanted to unwind for a few hours, avoid tedious arguments about politics, and maybe nurse a bourbon on the rocks while he put a bit of his own money on the line.

At the same time, the magazine writers were coming off as scolds and worse. They had relied on leaked documents from casinos to take a shot at a man because of his political beliefs. The *Washington Monthly* framed the story as payback: Bennett had criticized President Clinton during the impeachment fracas of the late ’90s—in fact, he even “gambled throughout Clinton’s impeachment”—so he was now fair game.³ He had spoken out against gay marriage, abortion, and crack cocaine so it made good sense to expose his private casino receipts to the light of day.

What’s more, the journalists didn’t have the goods, and they knew it. Joshua Green, principal author of the *Monthly* story, closed it out with this feather of a punch: “By furtively indulging in a costly vice that destroys millions of lives and families across the nation, Bennett has profoundly undermined the credibility of his word on this moral issue.” My loose translation: Bill Bennett is not as outraged as we are about gambling. He even plays the slots himself. How dare he.

So they tried to bait Bennett into responding. *Newsweek* editor Mark Whitaker closed his editor’s note for the issue by opining, “It appears . . . the conservative former Education secretary who makes his living writing about ‘virtue’”—note the scare quotes—“has a little vice.” He called the story a reminder that moralists “always seem to have an easier time lecturing others about behavior than controlling their own.”⁴

Green assured readers of the *Las Vegas Business Press* that other high rollers could relax because this was a onetime thing. Their target had been a “national scold” who “threw stones while he was living in a glass house.”⁵ It was the journalists’ job to expose the former drug czar, but there the scorched-roulette campaign would end. As long as gamblers stayed at the tables and didn’t hold forth on moral issues on CNN, they had little to fear from the muckrakers.

That was an astounding concession. Green was endorsing the *omertà*-like code of the numbers industry, with one important modification. He was saying that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas unless it happens to Bill Bennett.

“I’M NOT A HYPOCRITE”

Once the story broke, talking heads couldn’t stop talking about Bennett’s alleged hypocrisy. Bennett maintained that his gambling did not fall under the modern use of the term. For him, games of chance

were never a “moral issue,” and he had never spoken out against gambling *qua* gambling. He told interviewer Tim Russert that he hadn’t taken to his soapbox on this subject and so any contradictions were put there by his detractors. “I’m not a hypocrite,” Bennett said, over a month after the story broke.⁶

His critics were not persuaded and probably not persuadable. Writing in the online magazine *Slate*, Michael Kinsley tore into the noncontradiction defense. That he had never condemned gambling Kinsley wrote, “doesn’t show that Bennett is not a hypocrite. It just shows that he’s not a complete idiot.” Then Kinsley decided to channel the spirit of the great Dana Carvey *Saturday Night Live* character Church Lady: “Working his way down the list of other people’s pleasures, weaknesses, and abuses of American freedom, [Bennett] just happened to skip over his own. How convenient.”⁷

As went Kinsley, so went the tidal wave of respectable opinion. Because of the left-right format of most political television chat shows, many conservatives who are not gung-ho about gambling found themselves having to defend a high roller against charges of hypocrisy. This mismatch produced some comical results. On *Crossfire*, former Clinton administration flack Paul Begala used the Gospel of Matthew (or as he put it “the book of St. Matthews”) to Bible-thump an evangelical Christian rival over Bennett’s supposed moral laxity.⁸

In the weekly opinion magazine *The Nation*, Katha Pollitt expressed a fairly common liberal complaint about *l’affaire* Bennett. She wished it “had been sex, maybe some of that hot ‘man on do’ action that Senator Rick Santorum is so keen on chatting about.” However, she decided that since the target of the exposé had been Bennett, the “thundering sultan of sanctimony” himself, high stakes gambling would “do quite nicely.”⁹

Thus did the end (getting that bastard Bill Bennett) more than justify the means (digging through private casino records and publishing the results) that might otherwise have troubled sensitive progressive souls. But the same people who are normally fierce advocates of privacy and civil liberties were too busy piling on to notice. Here was a chance to kick a former drug czar when he was down, to censor a critic of rap music, yo. That sort of opportunity doesn’t come along every day. As a added bonus, they could call Bennett a sucker, a loser, a whale.

The condemnations grew so loud and numerous that Bennett’s old colleague and supporter William F. Buckley, Jr. weighed in with “discouraging commentary.” Buckley wrote in his nationally syndicated column that Bennett “is through.”¹⁰ His role in public life would be nil. No Republican administration would hire him. Book sales would dry up. The future he had to look forward to did not include playing the slots because he would need that money to buy milk for the wife and kids.

The “he’s through” view was a decent reflection of the evolving thought of America’s pundits and journalists. Many critics either predicted or openly wished that his gambling losses would also cost Bennett the position he had carved out for himself as Mr. Morality, or, to use Buckley’s more marble phrase, as “the nation’s premier secular catechist of virtue.”

Predictions of Bennett’s demise rested on three questionable assumptions that fall over like dominos on closer inspection. The first was that Bennett was, in fact, a hypocrite. The second, that hypocrisy would matter, that it would rob his words of any authority. The third assumption: Bennett’s audience would view the matter of his outing as a one-sided affair, with Bennett wearing the hypocritical horns and the chattering class sporting the halos. In fact, as I have already hinted, the

whole episode was shot through with hypocrisy. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

DEFINING THE MILK MONEY DOWN

That so many people were quick to label Bennett a hypocrite is a bit of a puzzlement. The *American Heritage Dictionary* is a pretty good bellwether of modern English usage. According to the most recent edition, hypocrisy is “the professing of beliefs or virtues one does not possess.”¹¹ Bennett never believed, and certainly never professed to believe, that gambling is wrong. He never spoke out against it or tried especially hard to hide the fact that he gambled. Therefore, Bill Bennett is not a hypocrite. Case dismissed.

Not so fast, said many of his old sparring partners. Beliefs are one thing, virtues another. Virtues are eternal and woven together like a sweater. Yank out one thread and you ruin the whole thing. As Michael Kinsley put the question, “Is there some reason why [Bennett's] general intolerance of the standard vices does not apply to this one? None that he's ever mentioned.”¹²

Actually, there was one really big reason, one that Bennett had mentioned repeatedly. Maybe Kinsley was too busy blasting away to comprehend it. Kinsley accused him of “spraying smarm” for divulging that he had started gambling with church bingo, but Bennett wasn't just blowing hot saliva flecked air. He was offering an explanation. Bennett is Catholic, and his understanding of right and wrong is informed and bounded by his religious tradition.

Bennett's religion is relevant because Catholicism envisions a more muscular role for a secular authority than, say, conservative strains of Protestantism, and it places a premium on being a law-abiding citizen. Case in point: the confessional gets mighty uncomfortable as every April fifteen approaches and a number of priests decide to ask if you have cheated on your taxes. (Best answer: “Well, father, you'll have to talk to my Jewish accountant.”)

Within the boundaries of what is legal, however, Bennett's church (and mine) tends to be fairly lenient with the thou-shaltnots. The use of marijuana and cocaine is a no-no, but alcohol and tobacco are permitted and then some. In cities with large ethnic Catholic populations, it isn't uncommon to go to a pub and find a priest, in his jacket and collar, belly up to the bar, pounding back the pints and lighting up coffin nails.

Granted, there are limits. All good Catholics are supposed to stop short of serious drunkenness, and they are encouraged to give such things up for the Lenten season leading up to Easter and certain holy days. But the rule, which runs counter to most stereotypes of the Catholic Church, is moderation and toleration rather than prohibition and repression.

So it is with gaming. According to the Catechism, gambling is A-OK as long as the gamblers don't play the grocery money. “Games of chance (card games, etc.) or wagers,” you see, “are not in themselves contrary to justice. They become morally un-acceptable when they deprive someone of what is necessary to provide for his needs and those of others.” The theologians do warn that the “passion” for gambling can become dangerous, but they reserve their heavy fire for the cheats and sharks: “Unfair wagers and cheating at games constitute grave matter.”¹³

Rome may be wrong about matters grave and small, but the vision that Bennett had put forward, and the standard against which it would have been appropriate to judge him, was a lay Catholic's vision of

the good life. Bennett's ideal man worked hard, paid his taxes, raised a family, went to church, gave charity, involved himself in the community, and unwound in ways that enjoy the sanction of law and are within his means. And Bennett's means were considerable enough that \$500 a pull did not place him outside this model.

Here's the point: Bennett was not gerrymandering a list of vices to exclude things that he enjoys. He was enjoying activities that church and society had taught him to regard as perfectly acceptable. The thing that was selective here was not Bennett's notion of hypocrisy but his opponents' preconceived notions of virtue. They viewed him as the no-fun guy, so evidence of fun was proof positive of his hypocrisy.

Now, you don't have to be a fan of Bennett to question whether his opponents were being remotely fair, or remotely reasonable. And you need not endorse, say, his views on abortion or drugs or rap music to wonder at this point if this whole hypocrisy thing has gotten a bit out of hand.

SHUT UP, THEY EXPLAINED

I have focused on the case of Bill Bennett so far because it's what golfers call a sure shot: a short putt from the green with no slope, no wind, next to no chance of missing. A gimme. Here was a man whose gambling losses were exposed largely because his political opponents wanted payback. Then, rather than argue with him, critics went to town on a straw man that was shaped vaguely like Bennett. He was a hypocrite because, well, because they wished it so. And this counterfeited hypocrisy was introduced as evidence that no one should take him seriously any-more. A columnist for the *Orlando Sentinel* complained, "If you're peddling virtue . . . you can't very well indulge in a vice."¹⁴

Read that last sentence again. It demonstrates perfectly a point of view that some wag might call the "saint or shut up" approach to hypocrisy. That is, if you are the Pope, Billy Graham, Jimmy Carter, Mother Teresa, Mister Rogers, or the Dalai Lama, you can talk. We will listen, though often grudgingly, to what you have to say on moral matters. Otherwise, we don't want to hear it. Take it to the Gamblers Anonymous meeting. Maybe the recovering poker fiends will care.

A few brave skeptics have raised objections to the "saint or shut up" formula. The most convincing criticism comes from human nature itself. People who exhibit one or more vices—in religious language, sinners—make up the bulk of the world's population. Yet experience tells us that those people who have vices usually also model better qualities, or virtues. If a man's behavior is usually good but not always admirable, does that disqualify him from speaking on moral issues? Should a single sin be enough to expel the would-be virtue peddler from the garden of polite opinion?

Ten years ago, political essayist Ramesh Ponnuru took up these questions for an article that ran in the Washington, D.C.-based conservative magazine *The Weekly Standard* under the catchy headline "In Defense of Hypocrisy."¹⁵ The backdrop for the essay was the outing of a political consultant as a prostitute-hiring toe sucker, but the analysis doesn't seem to have aged a nanosecond. In many ways, Ponnuru's words seem *more* relevant now in our post-9/11, post-Enron, post-Katrina world.

Brief flashback: Dick Morris was the Karl Rove of the 1990s, a talented political operator who secured a sitting president's reelection. Morris had worked with Bill Clinton from early in the future president's career in Arkansas politics. He helped Clinton claw his way back into the governor's

mansion in 1982 after a humiliating defeat, and he was handed the task of rehabilitating the president after the '94 midterm elections washed Clinton's party out of both branches of Congress.

By following Morris's counsel, Clinton bloodied the new Republican majority in Congress. He signed welfare reform and anti-gay-marriage legislation, which took a few big social issues out of play. He paid lip service to the antigovernment anger that had stung his own party by announcing in his next State of the Union Address that the "era of big government is over." He used popular fears about deficits to beat back tax cuts. Taking a cue from Morris's extensive polling, Clinton told middle America that the Grand Old Party-poopers wanted to cancel their Medicare, repeal Medicaid, defund schools, and dump toxins into lakes and streams.

The about-faces and the attacks infuriated Republicans, but they did the trick for Clinton's electoral prospects. Morris successfully repositioned (or "triangulated," as he likes to call it) his candidate as a socially sane, fiscally prudent champion of solid middle-class concerns against left-wing nutters and moneyed interests. So there was an awful lot of gloating by Republicans, with charges of hypocrisy sprinkled liberally, when the super-market tabloid *The Star* reported that Morris had hired a \$200-an-hour call girl named Sherry Rowlands.¹⁶

Rowlands stressed that she had come forward with this information with no prompting from Republicans. Two of her allegations received wide circulation and forced Morris to step down from his official advisory role to the White House. One, Morris had a particularly embarrassing foot fetish. Two, he liked to pillow talk about his connection with Clinton. Morris read Rowlands excerpts of a speech that the president had yet to deliver, and he called Clinton at his private residence and put the conversation on the speakerphone to impress his "date."

According to Ponnuru, Morris's Republican critics had accused the political consultant of hypocrisy because he helped sell President Clinton "as a family-values candidate while [Morris was] conducting an affair with the founder of A Woman's Personal Touch cleaning service."¹⁷ Ponnuru didn't argue with the charge that Morris was a hypocrite, but he pleaded with readers to cut hypocrisy some slack.

Since he was writing to a conservative audience, Ponnuru defended hypocrisy by appealing to self-preservation and shared principles. Right wingers should think twice before joining the anti-hypocritical pile-on, he argued, because moralistic Republicans are more susceptible to hypocrisy allegations than most politicians. Reports of philandering would not put much of a dent in the reputation of, say, Ted Kennedy, but they just might end the career of a Rick Santorum or a Dan Quayle.

That difference was unfortunate, he wrote, because if only saints are allowed to speak up for virtue then virtue is likely to be quickly shouted down. "Hypocrisy," Ponnuru explained, "serves an important social function." It allows us to retain moral standards even when we fail to measure up to those ideals. Then he pressed the claim even further: "For a society to be both decent and tolerable requires a healthy amount of hypocrisy."¹⁸

Ponnuru called the "saint or shut up" standard "in effect, a political weapon deployed solely against those who seek to raise public standards of morality." But framing the issue for a political conservative audience caused him to take a too-narrow view. Moralists may be more vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy than, say, nihilists, but Dick Morris was no moralist. Neither are many of the people who stutter to defend themselves when faced with accusations of hypocrisy today.

“WE MAKE UP ISSUES”

In 1999, Clint Eastwood’s *True Crime* was released in theaters to critical acclaim. The movie is a yarn about journalist Steve Everett’s race to beat the clock. At midnight, San Quentin inmate Frank Lou Beechum (played by a saintly Isaiah Washington) is set to die by lethal injection. Everett (Eastwood) a veteran investigative reporter whose boozing and womanizing have nearly washed him out of the news biz, comes to believe Beechum is innocent. He has to fight against the law, public opinion, his own wife, and a brutal deadline to prove it.

But first Everett has to land the assignment, and that story is at least as interesting as the rest of the film. The reporter who had been set to do the final interview with Beechum for the *Oakland Tribune* unexpectedly dies in a car crash. The vacancy leads to heated words between the paper’s young, neophyte idealistic editor (Bob Findley, played by Dennis Leary) and its jaded middle-aged owner (James Woods as Alan Mann) over whether to stick Everett on the beat.

Findley: The point is, this is not a Steve Everett slash-and-burn job, OK? This is a sidebar. It’s an issue piece.

Mann: *Oooh* (throat noises), an “issue piece.” Well, dog my cats!

Findley: This is capital punishment, Alan, OK? We are putting a man to death tonight. We are *killing a human being*.

Mann: Oh, well, stop the presses. Jeez. Hey, by the way, Bob, that Amy what’s-her-name—you know, the pregnant broad that old Frankie *shot* in the throat—was she a human being? Huh? Is that part of the issue?

Findley: Yeah, OK, that is part of the issue.

Mann: Bob, let me tell you something. Crumb cake?

Findley: (Taken aback.) No.

Mann: OK. Issues are shit that we make up to give ourselves an excuse to run good stories, *OK?* Judge grabs a female attorney’s tits, hey, that’s the sex discrimination “*issue*.” Nine-year-old blows away his brother with an Uzi, the child violence “*issue*.” People want to read about sex organs and blood, OK? We make up issues so they don’t have to feel too nasty about it, got it?

Findley: Then I might as well call Steve Everett now because that’s his attitude exactly.¹⁹

The newspaper owner character’s snap judgment may have been over the top, but that doesn’t mean he was wrong. There are many genuine issue pieces in newspapers and magazines today, but often the

“issue” simply serves as a way to tart up a scoop that you would normally read alongside “Wolf Blitzer Joins the Marines” and “Britney Spears Gives Birth” stories in the tabloid section of the supermarket checkout line.

Tabloids are fearless and shameless. They expose things because they understand that the audience wants to revel in the details. When *The Star* broke the Dick Morris story, it didn’t attempt to explain why it was running the piece. It was a scoop that would sell papers. Full stop. Justification need not apply.

Newsweek and the *Washington Monthly* are different animals. They think of themselves as respectable publications, and they both produce editorial content with a more discriminating, non-tabloid audience in mind. And so “Bill Bennett Loses Millions Gambling” had to be wrapped in the “issue” of Bennett’s supposed moralistic contradictions. The small joke here was that both publications engaged in massive actual hypocrisy to break a story that was about Bennett’s fake hypocrisy.

Peter Beinart, then-editor of the centrist-liberal weekly magazine the *New Republic*, wasn’t laughing. He was instead “dis-mayed” about a couple of things. He argued that journalists should have respected Bennett’s privacy, and he took issue with “prominent liberals” who had decided to relax their normal pro-privacy standard “in order to help destroy [Bennett].” Beinart explained, “exposing Bennett as a hypocrite, liberals need to make sure they don’t expose themselves as well.”²⁰

“Too late” would be an understatement here, but it would also substitute a jab for the point the book is trying to make. For the last several years, I have earned my keep in the word trade. In Washington, D.C., and around the continent, I’ve bumped up against editors, publishers, reporters, freelancers, columnists, authors, cartoonists, proofreaders, and plain-vanilla writers. I’m usually “up” on the latest gossip and “down” with a few tricks of the trade. I even moonlighted as a bona fide media critic for a spell and was therefore forced to pay special attention to how the press actually works.

Here’s a curiosity that a press critic has to scratch his head over all the time: When outsiders with no background in journalism look at a lot of the tricks that we use to gather and present news, they will often accuse us of hypocrisy. And, in the strictest sense, they are often right. A lot of what journalists do involves pretense. But those conventions seem a necessary part of the job, so we don’t pay them much mind. The mental calculation seems to run:

hypocrisy = bad

journalism = good

How could one possibly have *anything* to do with the other?

I’M OK—YOU’RE A HYPOCRITE

The greatest obstacle in the way of making the case for hypocrisy is this: it’s difficult to argue with a reflex. If you ask a man point-blank, “Are you a hypocrite?” his answer is unlikely to bear much of a relationship to the question you just put to him. He often hears, “Are you a bad person?” and answers *that* question instead. Few of us want to think of ourselves in such unflattering terms.

Critics who study closely the beliefs and actions of politicians, say, or journalists, will have an ear

time finding all kinds of hypocrisy, real or imagined, to get worked up about. However they often put their own hypocrisies in different categories, or call them by different names, if they recognize them at all. Hypocrisy frequently involves self-deception.

Normally the best course would be to let sleeping assumptions lie, but I see the old grudging tolerance for hypocrisy eroding, and I worry. Make no mistake, the reason that we notice so much hypocrisy in the world around us is that it is there. The response of both the wannabe puritan and the modern liberal is to attack the hypocrisy, to go to work on the contradiction. But what if all the hypocrisy is there for a reason, maybe even a very good reason?

In Defense of Hypocrisy is an attempt to supply that reason. It might even introduce some novel twists to the discussion. The forces of hypocrisy tend to mount a narrow defense of the so-called vice. Yes, they say, hypocrisy is less than ideal and it has led to some horrible, indefensible outcomes, but it also helps to prop up moral norms and preserve useful fictions. And without those norms and those illusions, well, we'd have anarchy.

In the 2005 film *Lord of War*, antihero arms smuggler Yuri Orlov (Nicolas Cage) patiently explains to the federal agent who has finally busted him why the government is going to cut the old deal and let the merchant loose. On several occasions Orlov had dirtied his hands so that certain officials could make a show of keeping theirs clean. He admits to the earnest young agent that, sure, he may be evil, but "I'm a necessary evil."

Now, the usual apologists for hypocrisy have a point about that, one that I will explore and examine. But their defense doesn't get us all the way to where we need to go. It runs out of gas and we have to push it the rest of the way. It's past time for a defense that is sleeker, with less rough edges and a better gas mileage. Call it Occam's Honda.

The long version of this argument will weave in and out of the rest of the book, but here it is in brief: Hypocrisy is so wide-spread that it might as well be part of our DNA. It is widespread because it is useful. It is useful for two reasons, one obvious and one that's a bit tricky.

While hypocrisy usually helps to prop up norms and pre-serve the existing order, that isn't always the case. It also provides a way for good men to pay lip service to heinous governments and warp social customs while working to thwart and ultimately undermine them.

You see, hypocrisy is not *just* a necessary evil. It's also an engine of moral progress.

* * *

A note to motivationally challenged readers: I'd prefer it if you read *In Defense of Hypocrisy* straight through, but it's your money and your time, so here's a cheat sheet. If you've no interest in examining hypocrisy in politics, start with the third chapter. If you don't want to know how hypocrisy works (its structure, history, use, and so forth), skip ahead to the fourth. No interest in hypocrisy and Christianity? On to the fifth! If hypocrisy in Hollywood doesn't float your boat, launch ahead to the sixth chapter. There you will learn, among other things, that intolerance of hypocrisy is causing many people to die painfully. Finally, I close with a Rodney King-like plea for a ceasefire in the hypocrisy wars. If that doesn't do it for you, give this book to your niece.

2

CONSERVATIVES AND CADS

Hypocrisy is a revolting, psychopathic state.

ANTON CHEKHOV

In January 2004, Dr. Anton Kris delivered a lecture in New York City at a meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association. The subject of the talk was hypocrisy and what we might call gullibility. Kris, a professor of psychiatry from Harvard Medical School, spoke about why we are often fooled by the behavior of hypocrites.¹

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said to the assembly of therapists, “we are all hypocritical about hypocrisy.” People routinely condemn it and condone it without noticing the internal contradiction. We “hold hypocrisy in contempt,” and yet we both expect and accept a certain amount of it. We even “applaud hypocritical accusations of hypocrisy” by politicians, so long as they happen to “share our views.”

He explained that people are often fooled by hypocrites because they need to believe in *something*. The simplest way to understand their dupedness, he said, is that the “desire for certainty” leads some to the “idealization of the hypocrite in exchange for the individual’s credulity.” The hypocrite represents himself as both certain and righteous, and so uncertain, unrighteous people are often more willing to trust him.

Then Kris dug down a bit. We tend to think of hypocrisy in terms of politics and religion, but it goes lower and taps into something deeper. The idea that some person or institution is “sufficiently powerful to dispel uncertainty,” he said, is an important conceit for child rearing, education, medicine, and, yes, psychoanalysis.

The speaker cited examples from literature and film and then circled around to his own profession. He used unethical analysts and their long-suffering patients as grand examples of predatory hypocrisy and the folks taken in by their behavior.

For instance, in one well-documented case an analyst “abruptly asked [a patient] for her sexual thoughts about him.” He touched her cheek and in the next session asked her to “sit in his lap and began caressing and kissing her.” When the patient asked if this was a normal part of treatment, the counselor replied that it was “in the literature,” and the explanation appeared to put away her doubt.

The affair lasted for several years and came to light only after the analyst had retired.

Kris was bothered by the fact that patients are often reluctant to stop seeing unethical, hypocritical analysts. Even after it is clear that something is grossly wrong with the normal doctor-client relationship, including childish or unreasonable demands or even sexual abuse, the patient will often stick it out with her analyst. She acquiesces against all available evidence, hoping that things will improve, not unlike the battered wife who insists that she tripped down the stairs.

Kris told the audience that he had found the best way to get such a patient to end the relationship was to convince her to see another analyst in addition to the unethical one. The new analyst then works to wean her off of the bad analyst's larger-than-life presence and self-serving advice.

But why should that half-measure be necessary? he wondered. Why is it that patients who see otherwise capable of holding down a job and getting along in life fail so badly when it comes to dealing with therapists who get out of line?

The reason is that they don't *want* to think badly of their analysts. A deep bond of trust is a necessary part of therapy, and it is prone to abuse by the more experienced party. When abuse occurs, patients have three options. First, there's the self-assertive option. Tell the good doctor to knock it off and stick to his mission to help you sort through your problems. Second is the legal option. Quit seeing the therapist and report his violations to a medical board or to the police.

But both of those scenarios are unappealing to many patients, and so they choose option number three by default. They allow their desire to continue the therapy—even once it has become abusive—to override their own good sense. A process that was meant to improve them and make them more independent instead diminishes them and makes them codependent. It warps their judgment.

Kris lamented that there is no adequate term for the party on the receiving end of hypocritical behavior. There are at least “two participants in hypocrisy,” and our designated words *gull*, *dupe*, and *victim* give the wrong impression of one of those parties. That is, the words “give the impression that there is a passive party,” when it takes two to tango. One leads, the other follows.

He wasn't blaming the victim so much as trying to understand why certain people are more likely to receive abuse than others. The hypocrite, Kris concluded, “trades both on desire and on defense against the dread of uncertainty.” The conditions that allow hypocritical snake oil salesmen to succeed come from impulses that are powerful and universal. It is not an exaggeration to say that a potential sucker is born every minute.

BRIDGES IN BROOKLYN

In politics, the hypocrite often poses as the righteous opponent of hypocrisy. A pitch-perfect case in point would be Howard Dean's appearance on *Meet the Press* in May of 2005. The recently elected chairman of the Democratic National Committee had been a controversial pick. He had been the early favorite to win the Democratic nomination the previous year before a few high-decibel missteps had derailed his candidacy, and his combative style and jagged partisanship made a lot of the powers-that-be in his party uneasy.²

You might think that Dean would use such a high profile appearance to put away donor concerns. But he had been elected to control the propaganda and fundraising arm of his party because it

activists wanted someone in that position who wasn't afraid to rhetorically frag Republicans. In his appearance that Sunday, Dean demonstrated that he knew who had put him there and exactly what role they wanted him to play.

Dean hit on the theme of Republican corruption early in the interview. He started out by saying that President Bush's proposal for Social Security reform (the creation of individual accounts that are publicly regulated but privately invested in stocks, bonds, or other financial devices) was "kind of off there." The president, said Dean, "basically wants to turn over Social Security to the same kind of people who gave us Enron."

And so it continued. Then House Majority Leader Tom DeLay had been criticized several times by the House Ethics Committee and DeLay's reprehensible response, said Dean, had been to "get rid of the Ethics Committee, or render them in-operable." He argued that DeLay was "not an ethical person" and that the majority leader's lack of integrity should disqualify him from serving in congressional leadership.

Meet the Press host Tim Russert asked the DNC chairman about a few explosive remarks. Dean had said the majority leader "ought to go back to Houston, where he can serve his jail sentence down the courtesy of the Texas taxpayers." Russert wondered, "'Serve his jail sentence'? He—what's he been convicted of?" Dean's response began, "He hasn't been convicted yet," which led to an exchange of views, so to speak:

Russert: You said in December of 2003 that we shouldn't prejudge Osama bin Laden. How can you sit here and have a different standard for Tom DeLay and prejudge him?

Dean: To be honest with you, Tim, I don't think I'm prejudging him. . . .

He continued by saying that, in his nonprejudgment, there was "a reasonable chance that [DeLay] might end up in jail."

The interviewer refused to let that answer be the end of it. He asked if Dean's demonization of the Republican leadership might get in the way of a civilized and robust debate:

Russert: Here's the Democratic National Committee Web site this morning. It is, in effect, a mug shot of Tom DeLay. You can see his height in the back with inches there, a serial number 18821. Is that appropriate, a mug shot?

Dean: I don't think it's appropriate for Tom DeLay to be in Congress, Tim. I really don't. . . . I think he ought to at least step aside while this ethics investigation is going on. We didn't start this. Look, we're not going to stoop to the kind of divisiveness that the Republicans are doing and we're not going to stoop to the kind of abuse of power, but we are going to be tough as nails. This is a fight for the soul of America between the Republicans and Democrats.

Dean's pose was an interesting one. He repeatedly passed judgment while pretending not to be passing judgment, and he couched his condemnations in the rhetoric of self-defense. He brought up the subject of the majority leader in the first place and then said that the "point is not to bring up Tom DeLay

which I'm sure we will, and his ethics problems," when that was precisely the point. He wanted to rub Republicans' noses in the fact that the majority leader was under fire.

“TO ROOT OUT HYPOCRISY”

Russert continued to throw Dean's past statements back at him, forcing the new party boss to defend his words in front of a national audience. At one recent Democratic Party function, Dean had done a bad impression of talk radio king Rush Limbaugh snorting cocaine to mock Limbaugh's stay in a rehab clinic and ongoing legal problems over his addiction to painkillers.

The interviewer asked if it was appropriate to “mock some-body who's gone into therapy” to treat drug addiction. The DNC chairman replied that the problem was “not that these folks have problems. Rather, he found it “galling to be lectured to about moral values by folks who have their own problems.”

“Hypocrisy is a value that I think has been embraced by the Republican Party,” he explained. “We get lectured by people all day long about moral values by people who have their own moral shortcomings. I don't think we ought to give a whole lot of lectures to people . . . and I don't think we ought to be lectured to by Republicans who have got all these problems themselves.”

And again: “Everybody has ethical shortcomings. We ought not to lecture each other about our ethical shortcomings.” This after he had said that Tom DeLay ought to be removed from office over his ethical shortcomings.

Dean pledged to use “whatever position I have to root out hypocrisy,” by which he meant to tear Republicans down and build up the members of his own party as relative incorruptibles. In Dean's estimation, Republicans have a few pet hypocritical values and Democrats have their own “pretended strong moral values” that they ought to do a better job of fighting for.

He placed his list of values “in contradiction to the Republicans' [values]” and used each bullet point to score a political one. Unlike the hypocritical Republicans, to paraphrase, we Democrats

- don't think children should go to bed hungry at night.
- wouldn't gamble away people's life savings in the stock market.
- have no desire to kick kids out of the public schools and shutter the doors.
- wouldn't treat Native Americans nearly so shoddily.
- believe universal publicly funded health care would be ideal.

At the end of this spiel, Dean announced that his own deeply held moral values were “offended by some of the things I hear on programs like *Rush Limbaugh*.”

He used the platform to tell fellow Democrats their problem was that in the past they had been unwilling to “stand up early on and fight back against folks like [Limbaugh] who thought they were going to push us around and bully us, and we're not going to do it anymore. We don't have to put up with that.”

STREET FIGHTING HAM

Now, think for a minute about the literal sense of some of Dean's words. "Root out hypocrisy," how exactly? Granted, "fight back" doesn't always mean literal fisticuffs, but isn't it sort of necessary for the back-and-forth of democracy that we have to at least pre-tend to put up with each other?

Not so much. In practice, republicanism is a much more vulgar, volatile, occasionally lethal medium than the civility-in-government types would like to admit. Remember, the third vice president of the United States shot our first secretary of the treasury dead in Weehawken, New Jersey over an insult that the former secretary didn't even remember making.³ Even Abraham Lincoln once narrowly averted a duel with broadswords, because his abnormally long arms gave him a tremendous advantage and forced a settlement.⁴

Remember, too, that in both cases the issue was not the public good but private grievance. It is possible, I suppose, to be too cynical about politics, but quite often public claims to high principle provide a fig leaf to cover over personal ambitions and rivalries. Many a critic of government corruption has become a champion of graft and privilege once in office, in part because the righteous critic of corruption is a role that voters expect our representatives to play before we're willing to give them the keys to the house.

Dr. Kris argues that what many people want from political leaders is the appearance of firm, unbending certainty. The best way to create that certainty in the minds of many is to lash out at the programs and missteps of political opponents in an overtly moralistic way. *They* are wrong about everything and *we* are right. Pushed to its logical limit (and Dean has been willing to push it that far) they are evil, we are good.

This all-or-nothing approach won't appeal to everyone, but it will appeal to many constituents who *want* to believe in some-thing. It's a good way to excite the people who are already on your own side and to attract some of the voters who have doubts about the leadership of the ruling party, and it also serves as a way to further dim the aura of certainty of your opponents. Time that they are forced to spend fending off charges of mismanagement, corruption, or moral turpitude is time they can't spend party building or arguing for a positive vision.

That's how I understood Howard Dean's performance on *Meet the Press*. The former Vermont governor was trying to project an image of a middle-aged street fighting New Englander who wasn't going to stand for the rank hypocrisies of the GOP. His attacks were a way of going around the back door to argue for his own virtue, and for the virtue of Democrats in general. He invited us to think of members of his own party as beyond corruption by attacking corruption.

The DNC chairman had attracted a devoted following in the presidential primaries with exactly this sort of message. He argued that President Bush had lied us into war and wrecked the country's finances with reckless tax cuts, and that it was time to muscle these unpleasant truths onto the public debate. If Bush was for it, Dean was (usually) agin' it, and so those people who opposed Bush latched on to Dean and held fast. The bond between the leader and his followers became an emotional one.

I helped edit a political Web site during the primary season and every time we published an article that criticized Dean or sounded skeptical about his chances of securing the Democratic nomination, the "Deaniacs" would rain down angry letters to the editor questioning our objectivity, our fairness

our sanity, and usually all three. Encouraged by their steadfast support, Dean soldiered on for far longer than any serious political analyst expected he would. He weathered loss after loss without conceding defeat.

On the day that Dean finally dropped out of the running, I was scheduled to observe a meeting of conservative activists in downtown Washington, D.C. I had purchased a novelty campaign-type button and wore it to the gathering as a gag without knowing quite how controversial it would become later in the day.

The button had a slogan in white lettering against a black backdrop. It was a play on the slack phrase “Mean People Suck.” It read, “Dean People Suck.” That evening, when I took the Metro home to my Fairfax, Virginia, townhouse, my room-mate Jim was along for the ride. Shortly after we got off, so did an early twenty-something-looking guy with dark hair, a back-pack with several slogan patches, and an axe to grind.

The young Deaniac noticed the button and trained his eyes on me with what Jim described as “that very harsh, not particularly antiwar look.” He continued to do double takes and shoot laser beams in my direction until he finally got off the train. It was clear as the bright blue sky that he wanted to start some-thing, but Dean supporters had learned a hard lesson that day about the power of superior numbers, and two-on-one apparently were not his kind of odds. So Dean’s statement, “We don’t have to put up with that [i.e., nonviolent criticism],” could be taken as a fairly menacing boast.

THE WRIGHT STUFF

In fairness, Howard Dean may be a great example of our modern obsession with hypocrisy, but he is far from unique. And he’s not completely nuts to think charges of corruption could bring his party back to power. By laying into alleged ethical lapses of Republicans, Dean was simply trying to replicate a style of politics that had been perfected most recently by Newt Gingrich.

Gingrich is a famously combative Republican who was elected to the House of Representatives from Georgia in 1978. He worked his way up the chain of command of his own party by the force of his own ambition and intellect, and with political instincts that were just a little bit ahead of the time.

The Georgia congressman took advantage of the fact that C-SPAN was covering the House at all times to speak to viewers. He delivered impassioned speeches against the Democrats when the House wasn’t conducting regular business. The Democratic leadership was so incensed by this that they ordered the cable channel to pan the chamber every so often, to show viewers that Gingrich was speaking to an empty House.⁵

Early on, Gingrich developed a talent for mucking about in House ethics scandals. He called for the expulsion of Congressmen Dan Crane and Gerry Studds when it came out that they’d had sex with underage congressional pages, and the whole House voted to formally reprimand both men.⁶ In 1988 he lodged the ethics complaint against Speaker of the House Jim Wright that eventually led Wright to resign from Congress.

As the second in command of the House Republicans, Gingrich led a minirevolt in 1990 against the first President Bush when Bush gave in to the Democrats’ demand to raise taxes to help reduce the

size of the deficit. He very publicly spoke out against the budget, calling it a “recession-increasing, job-killing, tax-increasing, and deficit-increasing package.”⁷

Freed from the obligation to defend George H. W. Bush’s policies and pitfalls, Republicans managed to pick up nine seats in the House in 1992 and to stage a historic victory two years later. In 1994 the GOP took fifty-four new seats in the House and eight in the Senate, gaining control of both bodies for the first time since before *Mister Ed* went off the air.

AN ALMOST PERFECT STORM

A big reason for the Republicans’ victory was the ethical cloud that followed Democrats wherever they went and hurled thunder-bolts at them every time they opened their mouths. Granted, President Bill Clinton’s tendency to tell audiences what he thought they wanted to hear harmed the credibility of his party. And charges that First Lady Hillary Clinton wanted to ram a Canadian-style single-payer overhaul of our health care system through Congress didn’t help. But a number of scandals also came together to blow away the old regime.

The first major scandal was the House Bank Scandal, nick-named Rubbergate for the thousands of bounced checks that congressmen had written to the House Bank, a federally subsidized private “bank” for our House members to deposit and draw on their payroll checks. In late September 1992 the congressional newspaper *Roll Call* broke the story that 134 representatives had bounced checks for \$1,000 or more in one year alone.⁸

Looking back on the scandal, *Roll Call* editors wrote, “every-thing that Congress did [suddenly] fell under the microscope,” including such privileges as “getting parking tickets fixed, dining credit cards, and an ambulance for Members [of Congress] only.”⁹ The House Bank was abolished before year-end, but the matter wasn’t finished.

Faced with the fact that over 350 current and past members had bounced checks totaling millions of dollars, the House Ethics Committee decided to release a list of a few dozen of the most flagrant violators in early ’92. The revelations smashed the normal incumbent advantages to pieces and led to a wave of retirements, resignations, and lost races over the next few election cycles.

The House Bank scandal opened the door to other scandals as well. Reporters kept digging into banking records, furiously filing Freedom of Information Act requests, and generally sniffing out other potential ethical violations or broken laws.

In July 1993, on the floor of the House, New York Congressman Bill Paxon said of one scandal that it “represents in microcosm all that is wrong with this House, forty years of one-party control, doors closed to public scrutiny, and putting personal interest above the public interest.”¹⁰ The rhetoric could have been applied to any number of ethical tremors, but this case was the House Post Office scandal. Congressmen had been using the House Post office to trade stamps and postal vouchers in for money.

And so it went. In 1994, powerful Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dan Rostenkowski resigned from the House after he was indicted for mail fraud, and for enriching himself by raiding his own campaign funds (he would eventually plead guilty and serve fifteen months in prison). In another year, this might have been seen as an isolated incident of corruption, but instead it was cast

something larger and more menacing.

Gingrich and company used every embarrassing revelation to build an indictment. They argued the Democrats were both wrong and corrupt, and that they needed to go. The dilemma that they faced was the fact that many of these scandals implicated Republicans as well, though to a lesser extent than the Democrats.

The congressional GOP had to do something to get beyond the idea that “everybody does it.” They had, in other words, to find some way to make voters believe in them. And so Newt Gingrich stepped forward with his masterstroke and his John Hancock.

CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS

Six weeks before the election, the GOP rolled out its big gun, a piece of paper signed by all but two House Republicans and all of the candidates for the lower house. It was a plan of action for a new Republican House. Newspapers and cable news covered it but weren’t quite sure what to make of it.

The Contract With America, as the document was called, was really two documents stitched together. It was a pledge to bring to the floor of the House ten proposals that addressed poll-tested popular policy reforms, including ordering that U.S. troops not serve under United Nations command, imposing term limits, and capping punitive damages on lawsuits. It was also something altogether more ingenious.

The preamble pledged that, if elected, an incoming Republican majority would act “not just to change [the House’s] policies, but even more important, to restore the bonds of trust between the people and their elected representatives.”¹¹

The righteous tone continued down the page. The document was issued during “this era of official evasion and posturing” and was pitched against the spirit of the age. The signatories of the Contract were proposing a “detailed agenda for national renewal, a written commitment with no fine print. You could take this one to the bank and it would not come back marked “insufficient funds” like the House Bank checks.

The House Republicans and candidates for office promised to “restore accountability to Congress. To end its cycle of scandal and disgrace. To make us all proud again of the way free people govern themselves.” Theirs would be a *do something* Congress, and then some. They would vote on all the Contract items within the first hundred days.

Before the Contract began to spell the issues out, it committed the signers to eight reforms that they would enact on the first *day* of the new session to begin the hard job of “restoring the faith and trust of the American people in their government.” To wit:

FIRST, require all laws that apply to the rest of the country also apply equally to the Congress;

SECOND, select a major, independent auditing firm to conduct a comprehensive audit of Congress for waste, fraud or abuse;

THIRD, cut the number of House committees, and cut committee staff by

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