

WILLIAM J. BENNETT [b. 1943]

## A Nation Worth Defending

Born in Brooklyn, New York, **William Bennett** has been a prominent public figure since the early 1980s. Bennett received a B.A. from Williams College, a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin, and a law degree from Harvard Law School. After running the National Humanities Center for five years, Bennett was appointed by President Ronald Reagan first as Director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and later as Secretary of Education. In 1988, President George H.W. Bush appointed him as Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, a position also known as "drug czar." The author and editor of numerous books, including *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (1996), Bennett has not been without controversy. In 2005, he made a questionable hypothetical link between aborting black males and a drop in crime. Bennett is currently the Washington Fellow of the Claremont Institute, a contributor to CNN, and the host of his own radio show, *Morning in America*.

*"American patriotism has always been rooted in love of the principles upon which the nation was founded: liberty, equality, justice, and democracy."*

On Sept. 11, 2001, America suffered more civilian casualties than on any other day in its 226 years when terrorists hijacked jetliners and crashed them into the nation's financial and military centers. Only through the heroism and courage of passengers on one plane were they prevented from striking the nation's capital. For many—especially those who lived in the cities struck—the shock and horror of that day remain with them. For others, however, the memory has faded. I recently spoke with a radio station in Portland, Ore., and asked the host how Sept. 11 had affected them. Not much, he admitted: "We think it was more of an East Coast thing."

In one way, this is a great strength of America: We move on. It is also, though, a great weakness, especially at a time like this. As Americans, we must remember more than we do. The U.S. is,

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indeed, a nation worth defending, but one that, surprisingly, many Americans find themselves reluctant to defend.

I am the chairman of Americans for Victory Over Terrorism (AVOT), dedicated to sustaining and strengthening American public opinion in the war on terrorism. We recently conducted a poll of college students to determine their knowledge of and attitudes about the war. What we found was disturbing:

- Less than half of those we surveyed could name the U.S. Secretary of State.
- About one-third could identify the prime minister of Israel and the U.S. Secretary of Defense.
- Approximately one-quarter could identify the three nations that Pres. Bush identified as the Axis of Evil.
- Fewer than 20% could name the American national security advisor and the United Nations' secretary-general.
- Just 14% could identify the president of Pakistan, even as we rely on that nation's help in the war in Afghanistan.

Moreover, of the 55 highest-ranked colleges and universities in the nation, not a single one requires students to take a course in American history in order to graduate. Only three require a course in Western civilization. This is cause for alarm, but it should not come as a surprise. The recently released National Assessment of Education Progress reveals that 57% of high school students are "below basic" in their knowledge of history. Just 18% of fourth-graders, 17% of eighth-graders, and 11% of 12th-graders score at the "proficient" level, the one at which the National Assessment Governing Board, the administrators of the tests, says all students should perform.

This historical ignorance is not merely of academic concern. It has real-world consequences. Returning to the AVOT poll, more than 70% of college students disagree—and 34% strongly disagree—that the values of the U.S. are superior to those of other countries. More than one-third disagree with the claim that, "Despite its flaws, the United States is the best country in the world." Eighty percent reject the claim that Western civilization, with its unparalleled achievements and human flourishing, is superior to Arab civilization. In what was perhaps the most striking finding, one-third said that they would evade a military draft in the war on terrorism; another third would refuse to serve abroad; and just one-third would willingly go fight overseas.

Ideas, author Richard Weaver famously wrote, have consequences. Similarly, pernicious ideas have pernicious consequences. The idea that America is no better than any other nation is one pernicious idea; the claim that our values are no better than any other set of