

The wages of rage: A year of outrage

by [John Spalding](#) in the [January 6, 1999](#) issue

I must say, reading William Bennett's *The Death of Outrage: Bill Clinton and the Assault on American Ideals* opened my eyes to two alarming facts. First, I learned that William Bennett really, really dislikes Bill Clinton--not to mention Europeans, whose politics lacks morality. (Europeans may have some things to teach us about "say, wine or haute couture," but on politics and morality "Americans have much to teach Europe.") Second, I learned that Americans' failure to loathe Clinton denotes a vast spiritual and moral lapse which poses a threat to American democracy "far different, more difficult to detect, more insidious" than Nazism, Japanese imperialism and Soviet communism ever were.

Where was the outrage? Are Americans really so decadent, cynical and bored that we would allow a president to get away with all that philandering with Monica Lewinsky and all that deception? Have we no concept of the seriousness of sin and its consequences? Maybe.

Or perhaps we're just wary of outrage. Perhaps we are too aware that outrage can lead to some strange events, as this past year amply demonstrates. (Or perhaps we're just outraged that William Bennett gets to make a good living pontificating about the decline of virtue and the death of outrage.)

Outrage may be out-outraged:

Bennett's *Death of Outrage* hit the New York Times best-seller list in September. Two months later, James Carville churned out . . . *And the Horse He Rode in on: The People v. Kenneth Starr*, in which he responds to Bennett's charges that Carville has unfairly attacked Starr: "Perhaps if Bill Bennett spent less time being sanctimonious and contemptuous and more time reading up on his American history and the First Amendment, he would be less likely to make asinine, historically inaccurate and downright goofy pronouncements in his attempt to rehabilitate the GOP's top hatchet man." The ragin' Cajun quickly surpassed Bennett on the *Times* list and has been outselling him ever since.

Outrage may land you with strange bedfellows:

After reading the Starr report, Larry Flynt wrote a letter to Ken Starr offering him a job writing for *Hustler*. "I am impressed by the salaciousness and voyeuristic nature of your work. The quality and quantity of the material you have assembled contains more pornographic references than those by 'Hustler Online' services this month."

Outrage--a slippery slope to absurdity?

According to the *Buffalo News*, Ross Perot "oozed out of the woodwork to charge that Clinton's capers are due to a cocaine habit."

Beware those prone to outrage, particularly if they're packin' heat:

Jerry Falwell believes the end is imminent and that the year 2000 computer problem may be an act of God creating mayhem around the world and igniting a revival preceding the rapture. In his \$28 videotape, "A Christian's Guide to the Millennium Bug," Falwell says he plans to amass "food, sugar, gasoline--and ammunition," the *Washington Post* reported. "Because I'm blessed with a little food and my family is inside the house with me," he explains in the video, "I've got to be sure I can persuade others not to mess with us."

Outrage may frighten small children and many adults:

Bill and Monica were featured in Hell House, a controversial annual Halloween haunted house run by Abundant Life Christian Center in Arvada, Colorado. A married couple depicted the famous pair in a suggestive Oval Office scene. "Three demon spirits--lies, lust and adultery--will show the undoing of the president of the United States," explained Keenan Roberts, director and founder of Hell House. In previous years, scenes at Hell House included a mock gay funeral; a car wreck caused by drunk driving; hell, in which people screamed and writhed on the floor; and an operating room in which a woman receives an abortion. Another new scene in Hell House '98: a teenage boy with a toy gun enacted a shooting spree in a high school cafeteria.

Outrage and hypocrisy:

Republicans fired up our indignation about the president's straying with an intern, only to confuse us when we learned that several among their own ranks were concealing adulterous affairs. Representative Dan Burton, who called Clinton a

"scumbag," admitted fathering a child outside of marriage. Indiana State Senator Steven Johnson, also married, admitted to a sexual affair with a 23-year-old intern who worked in his office in 1997. Representative Helen Chenoweth, a prominent critic of Clinton's sexual conduct, conceded she had carried on a six-year extramarital affair. The chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Representative Henry Hyde, acknowledged that in his 40s he carried on an extramarital five-year fling with a married woman, though he discounted it as a "youthful indiscretion." Then, during the impeachment hearings, Representative Bob Livingston, in line to be speaker of the House, resigned his post after news of his extramarital affairs was leaked to the press. In a familiar refrain, he said he had sought spiritual counseling and the forgiveness of his family. "I was running for speaker, not sainthood."

There's a place for outrage. After all, Jesus overturned the money-changers' tables in the temple. When indulged by the rest of us, however, outrage is often a pretty graceless sight.