

# *Race and Democracy in America*

by  
Peter Edelman and Stephanie Robinson

Last week, radio talk show host and former U.S. education Secretary Bill Bennett said, “if you wanted to reduce crime, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down.”

Bennett’s remarks are reprehensible by every moral, racial, and human decency standard. He should apologize – profusely – and the Salem Radio Network should fire him.

But there is another issue here, a more subtle one, whose consequences are just as damaging. In addition to their racial stink, Bennett’s comments underscore fundamental problems with American democracy itself.

First, let’s champion his right to say what he wants. The First Amendment is the cornerstone of American democracy, and Bill Bennett is free to say whatever he wants, no matter how putrid.

It seems, though, that we increasingly think the freedom of expression is *all* that matters in American democracy. But it’s not, and Bennett’s comments symbolize the depth and complexities of the troubles plaguing the American democratic experiment.

Democratic discourse is rarely *vibrant* anymore. It often consists now of people saying stupid things, sticking to carefully tailored scripts, or screaming at each other. Robust debate is not a bonus of a democratic system – it is the lifeblood of it.

Second, while all those who have condemned Bennett are right to do so, our bet is that when this controversy dies down, it will not have moved us forward at all. Bennett’s words aren’t worthy of debate, but the subjects – race, and crime, reproductive rights – are.

Perhaps the saddest symbol of Bennett’s remarks is how (tragically) well they capture the disconnection between America’s minorities and their democracy. For someone to say something so outrageous about an entire race of fellow citizens reflects the total disregard that some accord them in the political arena.

Moreover, it also reinforces the disincentives people of color have to engaging in civic life. In many minority communities, there is a palpable sense that the

system is not “for them.” Low-income minorities have been shunned by the levers of democracy for so long that they barely feel a part of it. Mr. Bennett’s comment will only drive them further away.

These lessons are inherent in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as well. Those who suffered the most were those most removed from the routines of civic life. We were shocked, shocked, to discover they had nowhere to turn – but the people of the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward have known that for a long time.

Yet, what if Katrina had never occurred? Would we have questioned the Bush administration’s lack of concern for the poor and its pursuit of one wealth-friendly tax cut after another? Would we have disputed the wisdom of municipal evacuation policies that rely on private transportation and individual initiative? Would we have cared about urban architectural schemes that disadvantage poor people of color while leaving wealthier neighborhoods high and dry? Too likely not.

Similarly, without Mr. Bennett’s radio broadcast, would we know such thoughts could possibly exist, even in the minds of avowedly conservative people? Probably not.

When events with nothing in common hold a common message, we should perk up and listen. The lesson we must learn is the degree of *isolation* Americans of color, especially those on the economic bottom, feel within their own democracy.

We must all remember that, in the words of Archibald Macleish, “Democracy is not a thing done but something a nation must always be doing.” The United States is not doing democracy very well right now.

A more robust notion of democracy requires broad commitments to community and equality. If democracy means embracing everyone, if it means identifying the common ground, then we have to pay more attention to those who still find their pursuit of happiness complicated by poverty, by a history of enslavement and subordination, and by the systematic appropriation of America’s treasure by a powerful few.

Such notions of democracy are workable. Look at history. We integrated the military, passed the Civil Rights Act, and created Head Start. These are just a few examples of how democracy can work when it listens as much as talks, includes more than excludes, and deals with reality rather than runs from it.

*Peter Edelman is a Professor of Law at Georgetown University Law Center and former Legislative Assistant to Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Stephanie Robinson is the Founding President & CEO of The Jamestown Project at Yale and former Chief Counsel to Senator Edward M. Kennedy.*