

THE NEW REPUBLIC

MARCH 20, 1995

Bradley's quiet, compelling message.

THE OTHER BILL

By Jim Sleeper

When a prominent senator speaks powerfully in public at a time when his own president seems mortally wounded, it's inevitable that rumors of presidential aspirations begin. So when New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley ruminated on the theme of "civil society" before the National Press Club on February 9, a *New York Times* headline pretty much reversed the point of a thoughtful speech by reporting, that "A SENATOR SEEKS TO FILL A LEADERSHIP VOID IN WASHINGTON." Within a week, *The New Yorker* also

panted about a possible challenge for the Democratic nomination. But listening to Bradley's talk reminded me why he remains such an attractive politician, and why horse-race politics has never been a good context in which to understand him.

Solicitude about a deteriorating civil society—Bradley's theme—has, of course, become so common that when a politician expresses it, most journalists' eyes glaze over with visions of the rumpled academics, communitarians, itinerant liberal gurus and right-wing policy wonks who usually hawk it. But Bradley added political realism to the rising national chorus of despair for what he called our decaying web of families, "churches, schools, fraternities, community centers, labor unions, synagogues, sports leagues, PTAs"—places where "a sense of common purpose and consensus are forged" along with "responsibility, trust, fraternity, solidarity and love."

Without naming anyone, Bradley distanced himself from two sets of civil society's would-be champions: the perfervid Newt Gingrich-Rush Limbaugh camp, which would rescue civil society from government but not from rapacious, capricious markets; and sentimentalists such as Garrison Keillor, Michael Lerner and Amitai Etzioni, who rhapsodize civil society yet in their own work keep much stronger ties to the media than to the real neighborhoods in which "Americans make their home, sustain their marriages, raise their families, hang out with their friends, meet their neighbors," as Bradley put it.

Isn't that sentimental, too? "To the sophisticates of national politics, it all sounds too painfully small-time, even corny," Bradley acknowledged. "In many ways the worlds of politics and business have delegitimized the local, the social, the cultural, the spiritual. Yet upon these things lie the whole edifice of our national well-being." What passes for sophistication among American yuppies is what's doing us in: "The language of the marketplace says, 'Get as much as you can for yourself.' The language of government says, 'Legislate for others what is good for them.' But the language of community, family and citizenship at its core is about ... the spirit of giving something freely, without measuring it out precisely or demanding something in return."

A thousand points of light? Sure. Yet Bradley swore off the easy paeans to civil society by George Bush, Bill Kristol and Gingrich. Some liberals, too, should be chastened by his point that Hollywood subverts civic culture as much as the welfare state does. Ever since we laughed Tipper Gore off the national stage a few years ago, only conservatives have charged, as Bradley does, that the entertainment industry abuses "the all-important role of storytelling which is essential to the formation of moral education that sustains a civil society" by feeding the young "a menu of violence without context and sex without attachment." By now it's clear that much of what appears even in *The New Yorker* or *Vanity Fair*, or on "Oprah" or "Geraldo," is as destruc-

tive of civil society as the tabloid mayhem most liberals sniff at (or the loopy Afrocentrism and facile multiculturalism they indulge). If Bradley is taking on a lot of potential opponents, that's mainly because civil society has a lot of them among the powerful in politics and the media.

Bradley reminds us that it isn't just right-wing blue-noses who disdain what Hollywood and the cultural elite purvey. Few middle-class Americans today flinch at a call to "recouple sex and parental responsibility" by sending "a very clear message—if you have sex with someone and she becomes pregnant, be prepared to have 15 percent of your wages for eighteen years go to support the mother and child." Most would warm to a call to "create more quality civic space" in schools that now "close at 4:00 p.m. only to see children in suburbs return to empty homes with television as their babysitter or, in cities, to the street corners where gangs make them an offer they can't refuse."

But conservatives can take scant comfort from Bradley's argument. He warned that "too often those who treat government as the enemy of freedom and a destroyer of families are strangely silent about the market's corrosive effects. . . . The answer is not censorship but more citizenship in the corporate boardroom and more active families who will turn off the trash, boycott the sponsors and tell the executives that you hold them personally responsible for making money from glorifying violence and human degradation." Take it away, John Podhoretz—and Rupert Murdoch.

Bradley has some practical suggestions. As kids come from school to homes that are empty because both parents must work, "We have only four options if we believe our rhetoric about the importance of child-rearing: higher compensation of one spouse so that the other can stay home permanently; a loving relative in the neighborhood; more taxes or higher salaries to pay for more day care programs; or parental leave measured in years, not weeks." He proposes to take the market out of campaign finance by limiting all contri-

butions to voluntary \$200 tax-return check-offs. No PAC or bundled or political-party money; "even the bankroll of a millionaire candidate would be off limits." He's confident "the process would adjust. Who knows, maybe attack ads would go"—with high-priced consultants—"and public discourse would grow." Over to you, Bob Shrum—and Frank Luntz.

Bradley is a Democrat, of course, and some of his remedies entail big-government action. But some of these are ones that liberals have avoided and conservatives have liked. Bradley's, in short, is the honest synthesis that Clinton promised but never delivered. His similarity—and dissimilarity—with Republicans is particularly telling. "Public policy can facilitate the

revitalization of democracy and civil society," he argued, "but it cannot create civil society. We can insist that fathers support their children financially, but fathers have to see the importance of spending time with their children. We can provide mothers and fathers with the tools they need to influence the storytelling of the mass media, but they ultimately must exercise that control. We can take special interests out of elections, but only people can vote." Compare that to Bradley's own New Jersey governor, Christie



BILL BRADLEY BY JOHN SPRINGS FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Todd Whitman. Delivering the Republican response to Clinton's State of the Union address, she kept regaling a raucous crowd of Trenton legislators with vows to cut taxes and get government off their backs. Conservative Republicans are usually better than she was at invoking civic virtue, if only to milk it in pursuit of such uncivil ends as a gun free-for-all and corporate welfare.

Where, then, is Bradley coming from? It hasn't been conservatives who have written most tellingly of civic renewal since serious thinking about it passed from Emile Durkheim to American social critics. It was Alan Wolfe and the late Christopher Lasch, both emerging from the left, who first showed American readers how the bureaucratic welfare state and the market both imperil civil society. Bradley draws on

recent work by liberals and centrists such as Benjamin Barber, Robert Putnam, Jean Bethke Elshtain and Robert Westbrook. Bradley retained Westbrook, the biographer of John Dewey, as a kind of office scholar for three months last year. He talks with Barber, a historian at Rutgers University, who touted civil society to Bill and Hillary Clinton at Camp David before this year's State of the Union.

Years ago, Bradley faced squarely the racial fault line that runs through civil society by asking that we pay blacks the minimal compliment of holding them to universal standards by refusing to excuse criminal or uncivil behavior to compensate for past oppression. (This, of course, was no less than Rosa Parks and young blacks at the Woolworth's lunch-counter asked by offering to embrace civil society, not trash it.)

Bradley's calls to responsible civil behavior should now be extended to the owners of death-dealing sex clubs or the defenders of date-rape tribunals, among other legally protected subversions of civic comity and trust. And maybe we should all acknowledge that precisely because civil society *can't* be created by government it must sometimes be coercive in its own, subtler, extra-legal ways. As Elshtain has written, decency and freedom may be inextricable from a capacity for shame, which at times is all that sustains, in each of us, what Bradley called civil society's "spirit of giving something freely." Shame, writes Elshtain, is the gift of socialization that only families and communities can provide.

Bradley understands that between the excesses of free market callousness and liberal statist intrusion, there is only a sliver of ground. He knows that civic responsibility is not where global capitalism and the welfare state are heading; and that the solutions will not come from liberal editors or Wall Street investors whose careers and profits are at stake in more globalization and cultural abstraction from ordinary, daily life.

Such thinking, alas, comes uneasily to many liberals, who cling to a faith in what Daniel Bell recently elegized as an almost Hegelian unfolding of Reason in history. Bell also despaired of Dionysian, Nietzschean eruptions that have beguiled the left as often as they have energized fascist nationalisms. What neither remnants of the right nor the left now appreciate is the importance of deferring a little to custom and culture as a way to muddle through our contemporary crises. Neither the bureaucratic welfare state nor the unbridled free market can nourish civic love (or, when it fails, shame). Nor can a civil-society rhetoric that merely indicts one side or the other. That is the argument that Bill Bradley began to make two weeks ago. It's an argument that goes beyond any putative presidential bid. Although it certainly doesn't exclude one.

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