

Virtue



WILLIAM J. BENNETT
Editor, 'The Book of Virtues'

His faith in 'hard virtue' comes from training in a Jesuit high school he calls a 'Catholic Sparta.' 'Virtues' helped make him a millionaire. In his next book, he promises, he'll make 'a special effort to find stuff from other cultures.'

BILL AND HILLARY CLINTON
President and First Lady

Their 'personal responsibility' campaign theme helped define them as New Democrats. But financial and personal troubles have hurt their credibility as merchants of virtue.



rats

With the fraying of America's moral fabric now a national obsession, the craving for 'virtue' is creating a new kind of politics and a new class of leaders. Who's pitching it—and can anyone put us back on track?

BY HOWARD FINEMAN

BILL BENNETT HAS TO GO, HAS TO FINISH THIS interview in his office near the White House, has to catch a plane. Another week, another round of speeches, some big-buck and corporate, some public and political. Everyone wants a piece of him, and he's glad to oblige. His "Book of Virtues" remains hot beyond expectation: about a million hardcover copies in print. He's now a cottage industry of character education—a multimedia McGuffey. First, there is to be a sequel. "Maybe I'll call it 'Son of the Book of Virtues,'" he jokes. Then, a series of virtue-teaching textbooks (elementary, junior high, senior high). Finally, inevitably, a deal in Hollywood, that precinct of sin that suddenly sees a market in virtue. Bennett will produce stories for film and television. "Some dramatizations, some animation," he says. The studio execs wanted to buy the rights to "Virtue." He refused. He wants to write, maybe host: the Alistair Cooke of character ed. "I've got to maintain quality control," Bennett explains. "You can't crap this stuff up."

Certainly not: you must do right by virtue. After years of drilling dry holes, the former Reagan-era everything (chief of the humanities endowment, drug czar, secretary of education) has hit a gusher. The fraying of America's social fabric—once considered the crotchety preoccupation of the cultural right—has become a national (even liberal) obsession. From the East Side of Manhattan to West L.A., Americans are agreeing that there are universally accepted principles of good character—"virtues" in Bennett's parlance—and that society is failing to teach them anymore.

Chaos, or the fear of it, has made Americans nostalgic for a more orderly age. The economy's perking along nicely, the world is more or less at peace, yet, in a new NEWSWEEK Poll, 76 percent of adults agree that "the United States is in moral and spiritual decline," and crime and drug abuse rank far ahead of jobs and health care as national concerns. The yearning for civility surfaces at town meetings. Democratic Rep. Ben Cardin of Maryland convened one near Baltimore recently. He had wanted to talk about the crime bill and health-care legislation. But voters in the high-school "multimedia center" (they don't call them libraries anymore) wanted to discuss something else. "No one today lives by the rules we were raised on," said one suburban mother in a sweat suit. "What happened to decency and respect?"

The craving for virtue goes beyond the debate over whose values

NEWSWEEK POLL

Do you think the United States is in a moral and spiritual decline?
76% Yes
20% No

Do questions about Bill Clinton's character hurt his ability to be an effective moral leader?
29% Seriously
43% Somewhat
25% Not at all

THE NEWSWEEK POLL,
JUNE 2-3, 1994



PEGGY NOONAN

Former GOP
speechwriter

After writing books on politics and baby-boomer angst, she's working on a documentary 'about values and the American character' with the founder of the Children's Television Workshop



are best—traditional families or single parents, gays or straights, Jews or Christians, black or white. It now seems painfully clear to most Americans that none of the traditional institutions is doing the job. Parents are absent or busy. "Neighbor" has been lost in the 'hood. "I Remember Mama" is long gone, replaced by Madonna music videos. Even religious institutions often seem more concerned with group grievances than individual behavior. Baby boomers, facing mortality and the even more frightening prospect of teenage kids, are finding that there is at least one absolute after all: good character.

THE VIRTUE CRUSADE IS CREATING a new kind of politics that could dominate the decade if economic or foreign crises don't intervene.

It's already produced a new class of leaders from across the political spectrum—call them Virtuecrats—who view the formation of good character as an urgent aim of government. They are pushing politics away from world affairs and economics into something more personal, trying to win votes by vowing to erase a new kind of deficit. "The New Frontier of the '90s is an inner one," declares former Republican speechwriter and author Peggy Noonan. It doesn't seem to bother Virtuecrats that Americans decry the ethics lapses of the same government they are calling on to inculcate virtue. "It's just another example of the central paradox of our time," says White House aide William Galston, who wrote a prescient book called "Liberal Purposes" in 1991. "People hate the government, but they keep asking it to do things."

And of course when politicians see a chance to play savior, they're happy to respond. The character crusade recently reached Congress—just ahead of last week's 17-count felony indictment against Rep. Dan Rostenkowski. Led by Pete Domenici and Sam Nunn, the Senate created a Character Counts Caucus, which has introduced a resolution to declare a National Character Counts Week this fall. The Clintons saw this trend early on and campaigned, in part, on a theme of personal responsibility. The president, in a carefully crafted set of addresses, spent last month's commencement season reminding graduates of the need for virtuous conduct. His wife, Hill-

ary Rodham Clinton, hasn't given up her search for a "politics of meaning" that she grounds in commitment to public service. "Bennett is on to something," says Clinton political adviser Paul Begala. "He's on to this notion that there are principles of behavior that Americans can agree on, follow and pass on." Next month the president will preside at a "character conference," and the White House will seek legislation requiring "character education" courses as part of a new elementary- and secondary-education bill. Both parties are racing to occupy this ground. Republicans see a chance to secure the Bible belt, to highlight Clinton's personal troubles without mentioning them in so many words and to put pressure on an important Democratic constitu-



NEWSWEEK POLLS

From what you know about their character, how would you rate the following as role models for young people today? (Percent saying good to excellent role model)

- 64% Billy Graham
- 60% Colin Powell
- 54% Michael Jordan
- 48% Hillary Clinton
- 44% Bob Dole
- 44% Dan Quayle
- 40% Bill Clinton
- 38% Ross Perot
- 25% William Bennett

THE NEWSWEEK POLL
JUNE 2-3, 1994

COLIN POWELL
Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs

He's quietly working on a memoir. But he's on every political radar screen: the GOP assumes he's one of them, but Clinton and he are friendly.

STEPHEN CARTER
Author of 'The Culture of Disbelief'

He champions spirituality's political value from his post at Yale law. His planned book series on 'character' will begin with 'Integrity,' 'Fidelity' and 'Decency.'

OLIVER NORTH
GOP Senate nominee from Virginia

Running against corruption in Washington, he admits none of his own for Iran-contra. In Congress, he claims, was 'virtuous' because he was following orders.

ency and source of funds: Hollywood. Democrats see a chance to go beyond interest-group politics and speak in spiritual tones. But there are risks for both parties, too. For Republicans, a secular crusade for "virtue" could clear the path for a takeover by the religious right, which insists that virtue is found only in orthodoxy. For Democrats, the risk is all too obvious: Clinton is not necessarily the best national leader to speak on this topic. In the NEWSWEEK Poll, 72 percent of Americans say that questions about his own character rob him of legitimacy on the issue.

But Virtuecrats are nothing if not brave: they are inviting more scrutiny of their own character. Some are even advertising their personal virtue—apparently on the theory that it's so rare in public life they may as well brag about it. In Florida, Republican gubernatorial contender Jeb Bush (second son of the former president) distributes campaign brochures that note he's been "happily married" for 20 years. In Massa-



achusetts, GOP Senate candidate Mitt Romney carts his telegenic family along on campaign stops, pursuing a not-so-subtle character attack on Ted Kennedy.

Nationally, Virtuecrats may be setting the stage for a Role Model candidacy that would seem to rule out the usual suspects in politics. For many Virtuecrats, the man of the moment is the presumptively virtuous Colin Powell. In the NEWSWEEK Poll, the retired general ranks just below Billy Graham as a role model: 60 percent regard Powell as "excellent or good" in that regard, compared with 40 percent who see Clinton that way. And Powell is writing a memoir, due out next summer, which will be loaded with the character-building lessons of his up-from-the-ghetto life. "There's a huge amount of interest in Powell," says GOP strategist William Kristol, who was chief of staff to a founding Virtuecrat, former vice president Dan Quayle. "Colin Powell is a man of character, a straight arrow. And his military

background gives him a claim to speak with authority."

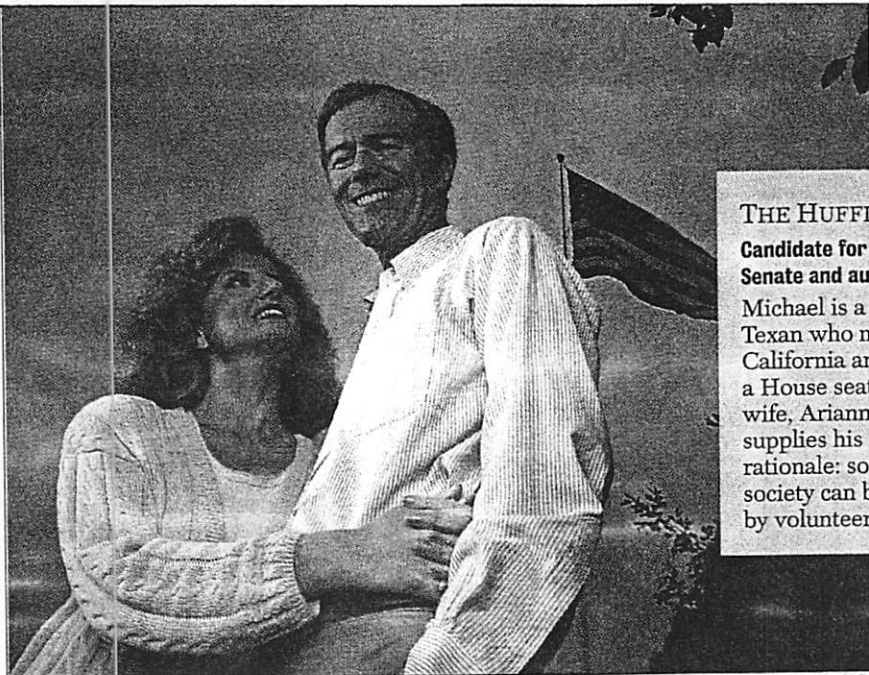
Luckily for the Clintons, Bennett—and probably Powell—you don't have to score a perfect 10 in virtue to join in the crusade. Actually, a lack of shame could be an advantage. For Hillary, a "meaningful" life apparently includes reaping huge profits on the futures market with the help of friends. Ollie North won the GOP nomination for the Senate in Virginia last week by talking about family and character. At least to Republican conventioners, it didn't seem to matter that he's an admitted liar and that a jury had found him guilty of shredding documents and illegally accepting a security system for his house. "It's not the politician's own character that gets him credit," says Mike Murphy, North's media adviser. "It's whether he's willing to stand up and say there is a moral crisis—in illegitimacy, crime, education."

Bennett cheerfully acknowledges his struggle to honor one of the virtues he pre-

scribes, self-discipline. "You know I have the cigarette fight, the eating fight, the temper," he says. In California, GOP Senate candidate Michael Huffington touts "The Book of Virtues" in an ad and preaches selfless volunteerism. A multimillionaire, he's also fending off charges from his political opponent that he avoided paying California's hefty income taxes for three years by keeping his legal residence in Texas long after moving his family to a sprawling home near Santa Barbara. As for Clinton, Bennett admires his chutzpah, though it's not one of the virtues in his book. "When he says 'Sex is not a sport, I'm for family values, for character'—this is courageous," says Bennett.

CHARACTER CRUSADES have occurred before in American politics. The public-school movement of the 1830s was launched in the name of civic virtue. Land-grant colleges were funded in the name not just of science but of "moral education," Bennett and Galston say. The most famous—and disastrous—effort to use government to make people virtuous was, of course, the temperance movement. It was launched at a time of social upheaval after the Revolution. The culmination was Prohibition, which lasted from 1919 to 1933, when the New Deal made filling jobs the paramount task of government.

Sobriety is easier to measure than good character. And specifying universal, incontestable standards of "virtue" isn't as simple as it seems from a glance at the Boy Scout manual (page 38). "Everybody's going to endorse these notions but defining them will create huge battles," predicts Yale law professor Stephen Carter. Virtuecrats are trying. In 1992, a group of educators and philosophers met in the mountains of Colorado and produced something they called the Aspen Declaration. It listed "Six Core Elements of Character" that should be inculcated by all "youth-influencing institutions": trustworthiness (including honesty and loyalty), respect, responsibility (including self-discipline and hard work), fairness, caring (compassion) and citizenship (including "obeying laws, staying informed and voting"). Bennett's list is similar, but with important additions: courage and faith; the latter, he says diplomatically, can be neutrally described as "reverence." "You can be a virtuous person without faith in God,"



THE HUFFINGTONS

Candidate for U.S. Senate and author

Michael is a wealthy Texan who moved to California and won a House seat. His wife, Arianna, supplies his rationale: souls and society can be saved by volunteerism.

LARA JO REGAN—SABA

he says. "I think. I mean I know some people. That's the best test."

Virtuecrats agree on at least one program to implement character education: punishment in all its forms (from jail time to denying government benefits). The virtue-teaching role of punishment has become a handy theme for both parties. Republicans can lift their old rhetoric to a higher plane. They can shelve the old, divisive "law and order" yawp that dates back to Richard Nixon's 1968 campaign, and can express a loftier motivation than saving taxpayer money. "Punishment can do a lot for criminals, and send a message to the rest of society," says Bennett. Democrats can demonstrate their belief in "tough love," says White House aide Galston—and answer the "soft on crime" accusation that has cost them votes for 25 years. Heavy spending on new prisons, "three strikes and you're out" sentencing laws, "deadbeat dad" statutes, "boot camps" for youthful offenders, "two years and you're out" welfare reform, denying welfare benefits to unwed mothers, police sweeps through housing projects, even local curfew ordinances—all are ideas being supported by... Democrats.

Beyond the uses of punishment and preaching, Virtuecrats disagree over what else government can do, and over the place of religion. In fact, there are three emerging strains of Virtuecrats: the Scouts, the McGuffeys and the Preachers.

The Scouts put their faith in

volunteerism—and in religious beliefs that encourage it. Huffington is a leading member of this school. He and his wife, author Arianna Huffington, want to put some heft into a theory weakly sold as "a thousand points of light" in the Bush administration. Huffington wants to change the tax laws to allow deductions for time spent doing volunteer work. "The hope lies in the withering away of the state," he says, "so that other institutions can do their work." In a new 30-minute infomercial his campaign is preparing, Huffington will spotlight successful volunteer programs he sees as an alternative to government. Noonan is in the Scout school, too. "Character building is mostly a matter of private quests and private struggles," she says, reflecting the theme of her new book, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." "You can't pass a government program to make decent human beings. We have to help each other out of this hole. This is a country full of prayer groups—and that's what they are for."

The McGuffeys take their name and their philosophy from the author of the famous textbooks so widely used by public schools in the 19th century. William McGuffey, like other civic crusaders of his era, believed that government had to be affirmatively involved in teaching goodness. Bennett and the Clintons are in this group. They are all for "character education" in public schools—a trend already exploding across the coun-

try. But there's much more. Though the president sold his "national service" program as a new piece of pork—low-interest college loans for all—he also meant national service to have a character-building function. Americans would be better citizens if they chose service—the rationale for the Peace Corps that Clinton heard as a boy. Fighting for health care is Hillary's service, her personal "politics of meaning." As for Bennett, he envisions a system of government-supported orphanages for the underclass: not the Nanny State but the Boys' Town State. In some cases, he says, the government has to be the "parent of last resort. This is a character-reclamation project," he says, "and you're going to have to do it in a fairly intense way."

THE PREACHERS INSIST THAT character education without the worship of God is worthless. Tuition vouchers and prayer in schools are their main goals. On prayer, there are champions in unexpected places. Yale professor Carter, author of "The Culture of Disbelief," notes that preachers in inner-city black churches are now at the forefront of the prayer-in-schools campaign. All three candidates for mayor of Washington—yes, even the ex-convict, Marion Barry—support it. "A society that ignores the moral side of life is going down the tubes," Carter declares. The political flash point is that many of the Preachers—from Pat Robertson to Pat Buchanan—want to teach Christian morality as well, in which they include opposition to abortion and homosexual rights. "They're going to try to tell me how my children should pray," says Clinton adviser Begala, "and that's where they are going to cause deep trouble in the country."

The real risk is that the Virtue movement will become just another example of what has become a leading American character trait: talking a good game. "There's no doubt that the pendulum is swinging back from self-expression to self-discipline," says Michael Horowitz of the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington. "But if we are serious about this, it means we will have to sacrifice some measure of the freedom we now have to do anything we want if it feels good." The true test of our character, in other words, will require more than applauding politicians and passing resolutions. In the end, it's not the laws we pass but the lives we lead. ■

NEWSWEEK POLL

Who is to blame for the problem of low morals and personal character in this country? (Percent saying blame a lot)

- 77% Breakdown of the family**
- 76% Individuals themselves**
- 67% Television and other popular entertainment**
- 55% Government and political leaders**
- 50% Economic conditions**
- 44% The schools**
- 26% Religious institutions**

FOR THIS NEWSWEEK POLL, PRINCETON SURVEY RESEARCH ASSOCIATES INTERVIEWED 748 ADULTS BY TELEPHONE JUNE 2-3, 1994. THE MARGIN OF ERROR IS +/- 4 PERCENTAGE POINTS. SOME RESPONSES NOT SHOWN. THE NEWSWEEK POLL © 1994 BY NEWSWEEK, INC.

What Is Virtue?

You can't lose it, like virginity, and don't confuse it with 'values,' which vary. Throughout a long, rich history, it's meant doing the right thing.

BY KENNETH L. WOODWARD

VIRTUE: FOR TOO MANY AMERICANS, the word suggests only a bygone bluenose era, prim lectures on sexual purity—at best, something you “lose” when you finally give in or give up. But for the ancient Greeks, the great medieval theologians and a growing number of contemporary philosophers as well, virtue has little to do with sexuality. For these thinkers, the cultivation of virtue makes individuals happy, wise, courageous, competent. The result is a good person, a responsible citizen and parent, a trusted leader, possibly even a saint. Without a virtuous people, according to this tradition, society cannot function well. And without a virtuous society, individuals cannot realize either their own or the common good. That, in theory, is what the “politics of virtue” is all about.

But before politicians embrace virtue as their latest election-year slogan, they would do well to tune in to contemporary philosophy. Despite the call for virtue, we live in an age of moral relativism. According to the dominant school of moral philosophy, the skepticism engendered by the Enlightenment has reduced all ideas of right and wrong to matters of personal taste, emotional preference or cultural choice. Since the truth cannot be known, neither can the good. In this view, the most any government can do is carve out rules that—like a traffic cop—ensure that a rough justice prevails among its citizens. Within agreed-upon social limits, therefore, people are free to make what they will of their private lives. In the United States, this outlook has

produced a strong emphasis on rights over responsibilities, and it influences much of contemporary political theory.

Against this moral relativism, advocates of the “ethics of virtue” argue that some personal choices are morally superior to others. The issue, as they see it, is not the right to choose but the right way to make

For the ordinary citizen, virtue is easily confused with “values.” Since personal values differ, Americans argue over whose values ought to be taught. But “values” is a morally neutral term that merely indicates preference and can be quite banal. To choose vanilla over chocolate is not the same as deciding how to raise children,



FORTITUDE

The strength of mind and courage to persevere in the face of adversity



TEMPERANCE

Self-discipline, the control of all unruly human passions and appetites

choices. The disorder of contemporary American society, they insist, is proof that the “Enlightenment Project,” as philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre of the University of Notre Dame puts it, has failed. What he and a variety of other influential thinkers like James Q. Wilson of UCLA, Martha Nussbaum of Brown University, Charles Taylor of McGill University in Canada and Bernard Williams of Oxford in England propose is the renewal of the idea of virtue—or character—as the basis for both personal and social ethics.

though both express values. A virtue, by contrast, is a quality of character by which individuals habitually recognize and *do* the right thing. “Instead of talking about ‘family values,’” says Wilson, “everybody would be better off talking about the virtues that a decent family tries to inculcate.” To Wilson and thinkers like him, these are the four classical virtues, old as Aristotle and just as compelling today: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance.

But they do need modern translation. Prudence, for example, is not cautious cal-

culcation but practical wisdom—recognizing and making the right choice in specific situations. It is the master virtue that makes all others possible. Justice, as the Greeks thought of it, includes fairness, honesty and keeping promises. Fortitude is courage—guts—not only in combat but, as Lincoln exemplified during the Civil War, in pursuit of the right path despite great risks. And temperance involves much more than moderation in drink. It is self-discipline, the control of all the human passions and sensual pleasures—anger and frustration as well as food, drink and sex. A person of good character, then, is someone who through repeated good acts achieves an appropriate balance of these virtues in his life. Like a successful tennis professional, the virtuous person plays a consistently good game.

ty—to Aristotle's four. To this day, Catholic candidates for sainthood are judged by those seven virtues—plus one that the Greeks never admired: humility. And in his own influential book, "The Moral Sense," Wilson adds compassion as the virtue by which we habitually extend to strangers that concern we readily show for family and friends.

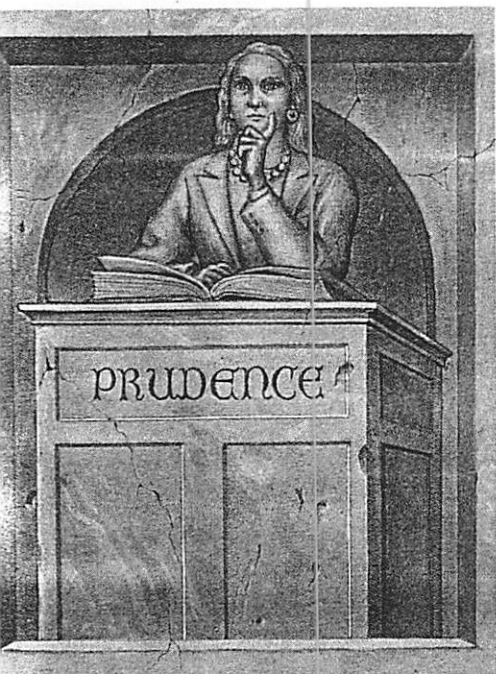
Can virtue be taught like academic subjects? This is what a number of public-school districts are asking themselves in response to parental demands that the classroom foster the formation of good character—as it did in the 19th century. Plato, whose philosophy focused on ideas, was inclined to think it could. But Aristotle was the wiser man. Unlike science and other intellectual pursuits, he reasoned, moral virtue is acquired only through prac-

textbooks. Good character comes from living in communities—family, neighborhood, religious and civic institutions—where virtue is encouraged and rewarded. For much of American history, that responsibility fell disproportionately on women: in the home, of course, but also in Sunday schools and one-room schoolhouses. But contemporary America is as far from its small-town past as ancient Athens is from midtown Manhattan. Sociologically, all of the core institutions that once transmitted moral education are in disrepair. The family has fractured; neighborhoods have disappeared or turned surly; many schools can barely educate, and even many churches wonder what to teach. "You can't have strong virtues without strong institutions," says Jean Bethke Elshtain, professor of political science at Vanderbilt University. "And you can't have strong institutions without moral authority."

But many Americans are unprepared to recognize any moral authority outside themselves. Even so, they are not without their value systems. Believers have their God, movement feminists their liberation, intellectuals their ideas, professionals their careers. In ethics, says MacIntyre, what we have are merely shards of competing moral traditions, none of them coherent. Among them the most prevalent is "the ethics of authenticity," a phrase that Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor uses to describe those whose controlling moral purpose is personal self-fulfillment. But even this narcissistic goal, popular since the '60s, cannot do without the virtues it refuses to recognize. As Wilson puts it, "Self-fulfillment presupposes that you have a self worth fulfilling."

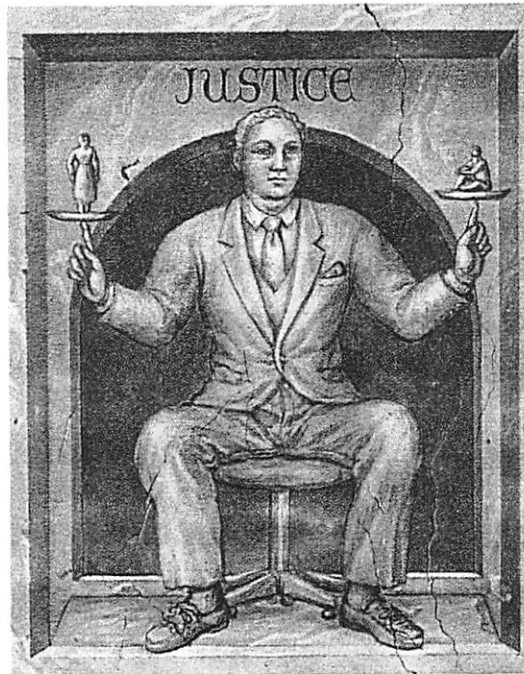
The ethics of virtue has its problems too. Sometimes virtues clash, as justice and compassion often do. Choices must be made, one good placed above another. Judgments must be made, too, on the behavior of others in society, even if it rubs the tarnish off their self-esteem. No ethical system is perfect, which is why religion persists, with its ethic of forgiveness. But the rising national debate over character may bring at least this much: a public rethinking of the kind of people we really want to be.

With SUSAN MILLER in New York



PRUDENCE

Practical wisdom and the ability to make the right choice in specific situations



JUSTICE

Fairness, honesty, lawfulness and the ability to keep one's promises

Traditional though they may be, the four virtues are not written on stone tablets. In "After Virtue," the most widely read American book on moral philosophy of the previous decade, MacIntyre points out that different societies emphasize different virtues—and often add new ones. Loyalty, for example, was a highly desired virtue in the clannish world of Homeric Greece as well as feudal Europe. Obedience to God's commands was central to ancient Israel. Christianity added three theological virtues—faith, hope and chari-

ty. "We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts," he wrote. Children, Aristotle observed, learn virtue by following rules of good behavior, hearing stories of virtuous people—like those in Bill Bennett's book—and imitating virtuous models: parents, friends and worthy public figures. A child born to bad parents or a citizen of a corrupt society, he concluded, had little chance of becoming a virtuous adult.

In short, an ethics of virtue cannot be learned alone. Nor can it be taught from