

Bennett's Bogus and Biased Guest Speaker by Christina Dean

William J. Bennett's thought-provoking essay, "A Nation Worth Defending," is composed of shocking statistics, outrageous claims, and sweeping historical references. Bennett's argument is that younger Americans' current reluctance to defend America either intellectually or on the battlefield is brought on by a failure to effectively teach them the so-called "truth" about American history (856). Keeping in mind his audience, Bennett successfully puts forth his notion about America; however, he overlooks important points by posting only biased opinions from secondary sources. Therefore, his argumentative tactics are insincere because he simply manipulates his audience. Although Bennett effectively addresses his intended audience, he underhandedly does so by presenting one-sided quotations, specifically from a British columnist whose qualifications go unmentioned.

"A Nation Worth Defending" first appeared post-September 11th in *USA Today*. Knowing the widespread reputation of the magazine this essay would premiere in, Bennett was careful in targeting his large audience. This audience consisted of concerned and attentive people across the country, including those who were directly affected by the events of September 11th. Conveniently, Bennett's essay was published in November of 2002, a time during which many Americans were confused and looking for answers or inspiration regarding the impending war on Iraq. Because so many people wanted to hear positive, uplifting ideas during a time of bewilderment concerning the heightened threat of terrorism, Bennett could employ strongly biased opinions to support his argument. Certainly, many readers are independent thinkers who develop ideas and opinions on their own, but other people rely solely on the news to formulate their opinions and are easily persuaded by whatever is presented to them. Bennett obviously knew that he had the potential to easily influence a majority of America by having his essay published in *USA Today* and successfully took full advantage of his opportunity by incorporating radical, subjective sources.

Within his essay, Bennett discusses the power of noble ideas and how they lead to "noble consequences and noble actions" on America's part (856). After his statement about noble ideas Bennett hopes to support his claims:

For example, in the 20th century alone, as one British columnist pointed out, "Americans saved Europe from barbarism in two world wars... [and] rebuilt the continent from ashes. They confronted and peacefully defeated Soviet Communism, the most murderous system ever devised by man... America, primarily, ejected Iraq from Kuwait and...stopped the slaughter in the Balkans while the Europeans dithered." (857)

Bennett goes on to say that this list of accomplishments could be multiplied ten times and it would still not cover everything. Clearly, Bennett neglects to mention all of the turmoil America has brought to many parts of the world. Because Bennett chooses to include this boldly stated quotation from this particular speaker, he avoids any alternative opinions from other people. In other words, by choosing a British columnist as his back-up support, Bennett only provides an opinion from an allied country's spokesperson. The British are one of our strongest allies, so it is no surprise that this columnist offers high praise towards American efforts. Although Bennett's argument may seem well supported, further analysis suggests that his choice of people to quote weakens the argument and/or does not enhance it. Choosing a British columnist is an effortless and easy way to present expected positive feedback. One

way to improve his argument or make it more believable would be to include a quotation from a foreigner who is not an American ally or to include someone with a different perspective.

It was a poor choice on Bennett's behalf to quote the British columnist as he does because a critical thinker would question the legitimacy of both the columnist's statement and the columnist himself. Bennett fails to provide the specifics about the columnist, including his historical background in addition to his qualifications as a columnist, so the reader is left not knowing whether or not to believe the content that is presented. Who is to say that this British columnist isn't a student with absolutely no level of respectability? When did the columnist write this article? Would his statement be different if it was written before or after September 11th? What would happen if Bennett included a quotation about the success of America if it were by another citizen from a different country? Certainly a columnist from a country such as North Korea or Japan would have a radically different opinion about the success or failure and nobility or humility of America throughout history. All of these questions arise because of Bennett's failure to include specifics, resulting in an invalid argument.

In addition to the British columnist, Bennett includes several other pro-America quotations to emphasize his ideas about the superiority of the Western world. Bennett either quotes or paraphrases American philosopher Arthur E. Murphy, American naval officer Stephen Decatur, American spy Nathan Hale, American ex-Senator and former Ambassador to the United Nations Daniel Patrick Moynihan, American President Abraham Lincoln, and a poll conducted by Americans for Victory Over Terrorism, an organization that Bennett himself chairs. Bennett even incorporates a fluffy quotation regarding the instillation of patriotism through education by the entire American Council of Trustees and Alumni. A careful reader might judge by the organization's name alone that it would typically aim to justify all actions of the United States and speak highly of the country. Even the most careful reader could not grasp the whole story, though, for Bennett fails to mention that he himself serves on the American Council of Trustees and Alumni National Council ("About ACTA"). Unfortunately, many readers may not stop to really think about whom Bennett cites and will therefore be trapped into believing the bogus quotations he presents. In this regard, "A Nation Worth Defending" succeeds in targeting and manipulating its thirsty-for-answers audience; however, Bennett weakens his argument by not including a variety of reliable sources and by failing to fully introduce the sources that he relies on so heavily.

Works Cited

- "About ACTA: Leadership: National Council" American Council of Trustees and Alumni. 2005. 1 Apr. 2005 <http://www.goacta.org/about_acta/council.html>.
- Bennett, William J. "A Nation Worth Defending." *Everything's an Argument with Readings*. 3rd ed. Ed. Andrea A. Lunsford, John J. Ruskiewicz, and Keith Walters. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. 854-861.

