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America's Gambling Hypocrisy

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Jacob Weisberg of *Slate.com* offers a very interesting essay on this nation's proclivity for moral hypocrisy on the issue of gambling. In "[Don't Bet on It](#)," Weisberg argues that Americans are torn between wanting to curtail gambling and wanting to profit by it. In many states, this means the rationalization through political means of some kinds of betting games over others.

From his essay:

What's the difference between the legal forms of gambling and the illegal forms? Some of the legal varieties are less appealing, in part because the "vig" [game's take] is higher (lotteries return less than 60 percent of their take in prizes). Certain kinds of authorized gambling convey the special grinniness of state-sponsored vice, which will be familiar to those who have visited riverboat casinos in desperate Mississippi and Indiana towns. But morally and in terms of their social consequence, it's hard to draw any distinction at all. All kinds of gambling, from bingo to baccarat, are benign entertainment for most people, dangerously addictive to a few, and capable of breeding unwanted side effects for society.

Various pressures ensure that the American hypocrisy about gambling will only get worse in the near future. The hunger of cash-starved state governments for new revenue streams combined with the miraculous renaissance of hundreds of Indian tribes previously unknown or assumed to be extinct means that the trend toward legalized gambling in more places is likely to continue apace. On the other hand, the vested power of established interests means that every new "gaming" venture faces resistance. More dollars are spent attempting to protect existing monopolies from competition than to create new ones—though Jack Abramoff's example lets an ambitious young lobbyist dream of one day being paid to push in both directions at the same time. Even if you took money and politics out of the equation, the eternal struggle between American Puritanism and the American love of excess—the cold war between Salt Lake City and Las Vegas—would prevent us from ever developing consistent or coherent laws and policies.

Now, Weisberg's essay is provocative, but hardly satisfying. He basically calls for cleaning up the hypocrisy by allowing virtually all forms of gambling to operate, but with regulation and heavy taxation. From a Christian perspective, this is just not good enough.

All forms of gambling are predatory and immoral in their very essence. The gaming industry — whatever the form of gaming — exists to entice persons to risk their money for the vain hope of financial gain. States are now in a rush to "profit" from the regulation and licensing of gaming in many forms, with state lotteries at the head of the list. Politicians argue that their state cannot be "left behind" in the rush to profit by gambling. Both political parties have heavy investment from gaming interests.

Mr. Weisberg's essay is a helpful reminder of the hypocrisy at the heart of the entire gambling issue as handled in our society. But there is no virtue in merely regulating and profiting by vice.

