

Newsworthy: Bill Moyers on journalism and democracy

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Throughout his career in print and broadcast journalism, Bill Moyers has blended a passionate interest in the workings of politics with a strong interest in religion. He is perhaps best known for the many interviews and reports he has produced and narrated for the Public Broadcasting System, including the “Faith and Reason” series in 2006. He has received over 30 Emmy awards for his documentary work and was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

Moyers began his career as a participant in politics. He was an aide to Senator Lyndon B. Johnson and served as deputy director of the Peace Corps under President John F. Kennedy. Later he was special assistant and then press secretary for President Johnson. At an earlier stage in life he attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and was ordained as a Baptist minister.

He is launching a new weekly series on PBS in April, and his documentary *Buying the War, about the press and the buildup to the war in Iraq*, airs on PBS on April 25. We spoke with him about the coverage of the war and about the health of journalism and democracy.

You were part of the Johnson administration during its escalation of the Vietnam War. What perspective does that experience give you on the current administration and the war in Iraq?

Both Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush made the mistake of embracing a totalistic policy for a concrete reality that requires instead a more pragmatic response. You shouldn't go to war for a Grand Theory on a hunch, yet both men plunged into complex local quarrels only to discover that they were treading on quicksand. And they learned too late that American exceptionalism doesn't mean we can work our will anywhere we please. While freedom may be a universal yearning, democracy is not, alas, a universal solution—there are too many extenuating circumstances.

Both presidents rushed to judgment on premature and flawed intelligence—LBJ after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Bush in conflating the terrorists attacks of 9/11 with the activities of Saddam Hussein. Each thought anything less than all-out victory would stigmatize his presidency. And in both wars, as the American people watched

the casualties mount and the horrors unfold—Abu Ghraib had its precedents in Vietnam—they saw the abstractions invoked by each president to justify the conflict confounded by the coarseness of human nature laid bare by war.

Vietnam cost far more in lives—American and Vietnamese—than Iraq has so far. What came out of it was not democracy but capitalism with a communist face—something that was likely to happen anyway, as it did in China. Iraq, on the other hand, has destabilized world affairs more than the Vietnam War ever did. Long after I am gone my grandchildren will be living with the consequences of this unilateral and preemptive war in the Middle East.

If the Bush administration were to ask you for your advice, what would you say to them?

Well, I did give President Bush advice once: on a broadcast I urged him to make Al Gore head of homeland security—in other words, turn our response to the terrorist attacks into a bipartisan effort, make the fight against terrorism an American cause, not a partisan battle cry.

What would I say now? Fire the ideologues and assign them to scrub the floors at Guantánamo for penitence. Stop confusing neocon pundits with Old Testament prophets. Read the Bible for humility's sake, but for policy's sake commit to memory the report of the Iraq Study Group. Don't sacrifice any more soldiers to prove you're in charge; get the soldiers out of the line of fire between Sunnis and Shi'ites. And remind your hirelings of Winston Churchill's definition of democracy as the occasional necessity of deferring to the opinions of other people.

What kind of response did you get from your speech to cadets at West Point, in which you spoke about the limitations and liabilities of war making?

For 30 seconds after I finished there was just silence in that large auditorium, and I thought: "You really blew it this time. You not only lost them, you insulted them." Then one by one, cluster by cluster, row by row, the cadets started standing up and applauding. I had to struggle to contain my emotions. I would like to tell you it was because they agreed with me. The truth is, I think, that they appreciated hearing a civilian talk openly about what they constantly wrestle with privately—the conflict of conscience required in obeying orders from leaders who have taken leave of reality. They listened like no audience I've had in a long time. And afterward they kept me up late in a lively give-and-take.

Earlier in the day I met for over two hours with a score of top cadets who were on their way to compete for Rhodes and Marshall scholarships and the like. They wanted to talk about the environment, science, philosophy, politics, history. The cadets are smart, disciplined and sophisticated people. One just hopes they get the civilian leadership they deserve.

One thing seems clear: In the buildup to the Iraq war and even in the first several years of that war, much of the news media did not ask tough questions of this administration. Why was that?

There are many reasons. The attacks of 9/11 brought a surge of solidarity that understandably engulfed journalists too. That event made asking critical questions difficult and unpopular. When cable networks and the major networks started reporting civilian casualties as a result of American actions in Afghanistan, for example, the patriot police came knocking. Later, if you challenged what the administration was saying about Iraq, they put you in their crosshairs again—charged you with being un-American, unpatriotic—for wanting evidence that Saddam really was behind 9/11, that he had ties to al-Qaeda, that he was actually building weapons of mass destruction.

Furthermore, a lot of journalists and editors are conditioned to believe that a thing is so because a president says it is so. Many young reporters thought it inconceivable that a government would lie or manipulate intelligence to go to war.

Stopping a government that's determined to go to war is always hard. But it's virtually impossible when large segments of the press mirror the official view of reality. When our channels of information become clogged with propaganda, the facts are trivialized; what officials say is the news, and no one else gets equal time.

The communications scholar Murray Edelman once wrote that "opinions about public policy do not spring immaculately or automatically into people's minds; they are always placed there by the interpretations of those who can most consistently get their claims and manufactured cues publicized widely." After 9/11 it proved easy for the administration and its apologists to manufacture a consensus motivated by fear.

There's also a real go-along-to-get-along mentality inside the beltway. When I left Washington 40 years ago it took me a while to realize that what's important is not how close you are to power but how close you are to the truth. The talk shows want to make "news" with the guest of the day whether or not the news has anything to do with reality. If you are a reporter in Washington, the official view of reality organizes your world.

One of my journalistic heroes is Charles J. Hanley of the Associated Press. He covered the weapons inspectors in Iraq for several months before the invasion, and his reporting should have caused everyone to see the administration's claims for what they were—fiction. But Hanley's own reporting was altered by editors who didn't want to be caught out on a limb.

This is the fellow, by the way, who reported the torture of Iraqis in American prisons before anyone else. American newspapers ignored it because, as Hanley said, "it was not an officially sanctioned story that begins with a handout from an official source." Think about that the next time you read or watch the news from Washington.

More generally, how do you assess the health of the news media? What concerns you and what gives you hope?

There's some world-class journalism being done in our country by journalists committed to getting as close as possible to the verifiable truth. Unfortunately, a few huge corporations now dominate the media landscape. And the news business is at war with journalism. Virtually everything the average person sees or hears outside of her own personal communications is determined by the interests of private, unaccountable executives and investors whose primary goal is increasing profits and raising the company's share price. One of the best newspaper groups, Knight Ridder—whose reporters were on to the truth about Iraq early on—was recently sold and broken up because a tiny handful of investors wanted more per share than they were getting.

Almost all the networks carried by most cable systems are owned by one of the major media conglomerates. Two-thirds of today's newspaper markets are monopolies, and they're dumbing down. As ownership gets more and more concentrated, fewer and fewer independent sources of information have survived in the marketplace. And those few significant alternatives that do survive, such as PBS and NPR, are under growing financial and political pressure to reduce critical news content.

Just the other day the major morning broadcast devoted long segments to analyzing why Britney Spears shaved her head, and the death of Anna Nicole Smith got more attention than the Americans or Iraqis killed in Baghdad that week. The next time you're at a newsstand, look at the celebrities staring back at you. In-depth coverage on anything, let alone the bleak facts of power and powerlessness that shape the lives of ordinary people, is as scarce as sex, violence and voyeurism are pervasive.

At the same time we have seen the rise of an ideological partisan press that is contemptuous of reality, serves up right-wing propaganda as fact, and attempts to demonize anyone who says otherwise. Its embodiment is Rush Limbaugh. Millions heard him take journalists to task for their reporting on the torture at Abu Ghraib, which he attempted to dismiss as a little necessary sport for soldiers under stress. He said: "This is no different than what happens at the Skull and Bones initiation. . . . You ever heard of people [who] need to blow some steam off?"

So we can't make the case today that the dominant institutions of the press are guardians of democracy. They actually work to keep reality from us, whether it's the truth of money in politics, the social costs of "free trade," growing inequality, the resegregation of our public schools, or the devastating onward march of environmental deregulation. It's as if we are living on a huge plantation in a story told by the boss man.

What encourages me is the Internet. Freedom begins the moment you realize someone else has been writing your story and it's time you took the pen from his hand and started writing it yourself. The greatest challenge to the conglomeration of the media giants and the malevolent mentality of the partisan press is the innovation and expression made possible by the digital revolution. I'm also buoyed by the beginnings of a movement across the country of people who are fighting to keep mammoth corporations from controlling access to the Internet as they managed to control radio, then television, then cable. To find out more about this, go to Freepress.net or Savetheinternet.com.

What also gives me hope is that in a market society, sooner or later some entrepreneur is going to figure out how to make a fortune by offering people news they can trust. Millions of Americans care about our democracy, they want high-quality information because they know freedom dies of too many lies, and surely in this new age of innovation someone's going to figure out that good journalism can be profitable.

Where do you get your news?

I keep stacks of magazines beside my bed to read at night—including the *Christian Century*.

It's not a good day if I haven't roamed half a dozen newspapers, a score of Web sites (journalistic, liberal, conservative, religious, secular—you name it, the Web has it), two or three newsletters, a quarterly journal or two, and summaries of news and opinion sent to me by my colleagues.

I check out a few bloggers—just because it pays to know how others see the world. It also helps to know who's demonizing you today. Some bloggers are quite thoughtful, analytical, fair. Some are downright scurrilous—for example, the right-wing Moonie-connected blogger who recently lied about Barack Obama's schooling.

Sometimes I think there are too many voices inside my head. Maybe I read too much. But they make sure I never think a matter settled. I'm with Mark Twain on this: "Loyalty to petrified opinion never yet broke a chain or freed a human soul."

What do you think of the success of satirists like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert?

There can be more truth in a flash of wit than in a full-throated pronouncement by a pundit. I once told Stewart that if Mark Twain were alive today, he would be on Comedy Central. Stewart looked at me as if he wouldn't welcome the competition. As for Colbert: he's one smart fellow, but he scares me, even when he's funny, because you sometimes forget he's only kidding. Being an old fogey, I worry about mixing journalism with entertainment. But I confess that it's difficult not to write satire these days. Sometimes only satire makes sense. Enemies of the state, as satirists are, can be friends of the people.

But I wouldn't dare try satire as a journalist; I'd have to target myself—and I'm not one for self-immolation.

You seem to have a very strong populist perspective. Where does that come from?

If I had been an embattled farmer exploited by the railroads and bankers back in the 19th century, I hope I would have shown up at that amazing convention in Omaha that adopted the platform beginning: "We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin." Those folks were aroused by Christian outrage over injustice. They made the prairie rumble. If I had lived a few years later, I would hope to have worked for McClure's, the great magazine that probed the institutional corruption of the day and prompted progressive agitation.

The Great Depression was the tsunami of my experience, and my perspective was shaped by Main Street, not Wall Street. My parents were laid low by the Depression. When I was born my father was making \$2 a day working on the highway, and he never brought home more than \$100 a week in his working life. He didn't even earn that much until he joined the union on his last job. Like Franklin Roosevelt, I came to think that government by organized money should be feared as much as government by organized mob. I'd rather not have either, thank you.

I am a democrat—notice the small *d*—who believes that the soul of democracy is representative government. It's our best, although certainly imperfect, protection against predatory forces, whether unfettered markets, unscrupulous neighbors or fantastical ideologies—foreign or domestic. Our best chance at governing ourselves lies in obtaining the considered judgments of those we elect to weigh the competing interests and decide to the best of their ability what is right for the country. Anything that corrupts their judgment—whether rigged elections or bribery masked as campaign contributions—is the devil's work.

Can you name a single issue that concerns you the most these days?

Inequality. Nearly all the wealth created in America over the past 25 years was captured by the top 20 percent of households. Meanwhile, working families find it harder and harder to make ends meet. Young people without privilege and wealth struggle to get a footing. Seniors enjoy less and less security for a lifetime's labor. We are racially segregated in every meaningful sense except the letter of the law. And survivors of segregation and immigration toil for pennies on the dollar compared to those they serve.

None of this is the result of Adam Smith's "invisible hand" creating the greatest good for the greatest number. It's the result of invisible hands that write the checks to buy political protection for privilege. There's been a campaign to organize the world economy for the benefit of corporations. Whatever its benefits, political and corporate efforts to deregulate the international economy and promote globalization have been the most powerful force of political, economic, social and cultural destabilization the world has known since World War II.

The Nobel laureate Robert Solow is not a man given to extreme political statements. He characterizes what has been happening in America as nothing less than elite plunder: "The redistribution of wealth in favor of the wealthy and of power in favor of the powerful."

This wasn't meant to be a country where the winner takes all. Read the Declaration of Independence, the preamble to the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address. We were going to be a society that maintained a healthy equilibrium in how power works—and for whom.

Although my parents were knocked down and almost out by the Depression and were poor all their lives, I went to good public schools. My brother made it to college on the GI bill. When I borrowed \$450 to buy my first car, I drove to a public university on public highways and rested in public parks along the way. America was a shared project and I was just one of its beneficiaries. But a vast transformation has been occurring, documented in a series of recent studies. The American Political Science Association, for example, finds that "increasing inequalities threaten the American ideal of equal citizenship and that progress toward real democracy may have stalled . . . and even reversed."

So here is the deepest crisis as I see it: We talk about problems, issues, policy solutions, but we don't talk about what democracy means—what it bestows on us, the power it gives us—the astonishing opportunity to shape our destiny. I mean the revolutionary idea that democracy isn't merely a means of government, it's a means of dignifying people so that they have a chance to become fully human. Every day I find myself asking, Why is America forsaking its own revolution?

You once remarked that seminary was a detour in your life. Why did you go to seminary and what difference do you think it made for you?

I knew at age 15 that I wanted to be a journalist—then, a little later, a political journalist. That’s how I wound up spending the summer of 1954 on Lyndon Johnson’s staff in the Senate. I wanted to learn the game at the feet of the master.

But I came home feeling unsatisfied by that experience, and I interpreted my angst as a call to something more fulfilling—the ministry, actually. I thought of the pastorate or a professorship. I spent four years getting my master of divinity before finding myself back in politics and government and then back again in journalism.

For a while I thought I had made a mistake, that I would have been better off if I had spent those four years in law school or getting a Ph.D. But as the years unfolded I realized what a blessing seminary had been. I had a succession of remarkable teachers who believed that a true evangelical is always a seeker. T. B. Maston, one of the great souls in my life, taught Christian ethics and more than anyone else helped me to see into the southern enigma of having grown up well loved, well churched and well taught and yet still indifferent to the reality of other people’s lives. I learned about historical criticism, the beauty of the Greek language, and the witness of my Baptist ancestors to the power of conscience. That detour turned out to be quite a journey.

Later on, when I realized how almost every political and economic issue I dealt with in government and then as a journalist intersects with moral and ethical values, I was grateful for those years in seminary. They still inform my life.

So much is being written and said about the alliance between the religious right and the Republican Party. What role do you think religion should have in the public arena?

Whose religion? Christian? Muslim? Jew? Sikh? Buddhist? Catholic? Protestant? Shi‘ite? Sunni? Orthodox? Conservative? Mormon? Amish? Wicca? For that matter, which Baptist? Bill Clinton or Pat Robertson? Newt Gingrich or Al Gore? And who is going to decide? The religion of one seems madness to another. Elaine Pagels said to me in an interview that she doesn’t know a single religion that affirms the other’s choice.

If religion is the voice of the deepest human experience—and I believe it is—humanity contains multitudes, each speaking in a different tongue. Naturally, believers will bring their faith into the public square, translating their unique personal experience into political convictions and moral arguments. But politics is about settling differences while religion is about maintaining them. Let’s realize what a treasure we have in a secular democracy that guarantees your freedom to believe as you choose and mine to vote as I wish.

Some people on the left think the Democratic Party needs to be more explicitly religious. What do you think about that counterstrategy?

If you have to talk about God to win elections, that doesn’t speak well of God or elections. We are desperate today for cool thinking and clear analysis. What kind of country is it that wants its politicians to play tricks with faith?

As you look back on your work, what gives you the most satisfaction?

The happiest years of my life were the time I helped to organize the Peace Corps and served as its deputy director. We really did believe that we were engaged in the moral equivalent of war.

My long career in journalism has been a continuing course in adult education, and I have been fortunate to share what I have learned with so many others. We journalists are beachcombers on the shores of other people’s

experience and knowledge, but we don't take what we gather and lock it in the attic. Like a pastor in the pulpit, we're engaged in a moral transaction. When people give us an hour of their lives—something they never get back—we owe them something of value in return. Keeping our end of the bargain isn't easy, but it's deeply satisfying.