

Bill Moyers



By Peter Dreier

We are this close to losing democracy to the mercenary class.

Last October, Bill Moyers announced that he was retiring and that his weekly show, *Moyers & Company*, would end January 3. Three weeks later, in response to an outpouring of e-mails, letters, and Facebook comments urging him to reconsider, Moyers recanted. He will continue to host the show. His only pushback was to recast the show from an hour to a half-hour format.

Moyers, who turns eighty in June, has been one of the most prolific and influential figures in American journalism. Born in 1934 to dirt-poor farmers, Moyers left Marshall, Texas, in 1954 to attend college. At the University of Texas, he majored in journalism while working full time as assistant news editor for KTBC-TV for \$100 a week. He graduated in 1956 and then studied theology at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In 1959, Moyers moved to Washington, D.C., to work for Senator Lyndon Johnson. Moyers was a founding organizer of the Peace Corps in 1961 and was appointed its deputy director by President Kennedy. After Kennedy was assassinated, LBJ brought Moyers to the White House as his assistant for domestic policy with responsibility for shepherding the task forces that led to LBJ's Great Society program. Moyers played a key role in helping LBJ pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1966, Moyers reluctantly agreed to be LBJ's press secretary, but he found it increasingly difficult to defend the escalation of the Vietnam War.

“The things I really cared about—poverty, the Great Society, civil rights—were all being drained away by the war,” he recalled. “The line that keeps running through my mind is the line I never spoke: ‘I can't speak for a war that I believe is immoral.’ ”

Moyers resigned from the White House in 1967 and became the publisher of *Newsday*, a daily newspaper that primarily served New York's Long Island suburbs. He left in 1970 and took a 13,000-mile bus trip around the country, armed with a notepad and tape recorder, interviewing people for his best-selling book, *Listening to America: A Traveler Rediscovered His Country*.

That year, he began his long relationship with public television, interrupted by a decade (1976–1986) at CBS News. In order to maintain his journalistic independence, Moyers formed his own production company and raised all the funds for his many productions.

On public television, Moyers, a master of the long interview, had the freedom to craft his own programs, including *Now with Bill Moyers*, *Moyers on America*, *Bill Moyers Journal*, and, since 2011, *Moyers & Company*. He has interviewed important thinkers and activists rarely seen on television, including community organizers Ernesto Cortés, historian Howard Zinn, scientist René Dubos, philosopher Joseph Campbell, and theologian Karen Armstrong. He also produced hard-hitting investigative documentaries on a wide variety of topics, including the cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars on local communities, campaign finance, inadequate funding for public schools, the rise of the Religious Right, global warming, the dumping of hazardous waste, and, in *Buying the War* (2007), how most of the press corps became complicit in the Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq.

“If the watchdog doesn't bark,” Moyers said about the show, “how do you know there's a burglar in the basement? And the press is supposed to be a watchdog.”

Moyers's work has received three dozen Emmys and many other awards.

I caught up with Moyers in January. We spoke about his life, his career, LBJ, and his views about contemporary journalism and politics.

Q: You've announced your retirement three times, then changed your mind. Why?

Bill Moyers: When I announced my retirement last October, it lasted all of seventeen days. I really meant it, but during that time thousands of viewers wrote to say, "Don't go!" Reading those letters, I felt like a deserter abandoning his comrades in the heat of battle. So, I took stock: My health is good. I like what I do and keep thinking the best is yet to come. I'm only seventy-nine. So over coffee one morning, my wife and I looked at each other and said: "Why not?"

Q: What gives you the will power and energy to keep up the fight?

Moyers: Somewhere I read, "There's another man within me that's angry with me." So, yes—I'm angry at what's happening to our country and angry with myself that I can't do more. I would be miserable if I couldn't bear witness.

Q: What role has your religious faith played in shaping your political views and your journalism?

Moyers: When I was growing up, I never heard anyone pray, "Give me this day my daily bread." It was always, "Give us this day our daily bread." That stuck. We're all in this together. I take "We, the People" seriously because I don't know how we build a civilization without reciprocity. There's a moral contract in that Preamble. And although I was brought up in a culturally and religious conservative culture, as a Baptist I was taught that no one has the right to subpoena your conscience.

Q: What muckrakers and investigative reporters do you most admire?

Moyers: The Mount Rushmore of muckraking includes Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, and I. F. Stone. But if I could be anyone today, it would be Ambrose Bierce. Dennis Drabelle's new book, *The Great American Railroad War: How Ambrose Bierce and Frank Norris Took on the Notorious Central Pacific Railroad*, is a thriller about how Bierce was hired by William Randolph Hearst to take a SWAT team of reporters and editors to Washington to stop the very rich and ruthless Collis Huntington, the railroad baron, from bribing Congress and passing on to taxpayers the big loan he had obtained from the government. They beat him just as he was about to buy the last man. Oh, for that kind of impact today!

Now, there are fine investigative reporters at work today—on *The New York Times*, at McClatchy newspapers, ProPublica, the Center for Public Integrity, the Center for Investigative Reporting, and among independents

young people like Andy Kroll and Lee Fang, to name just a couple. I consider Mother Jones to be a modern McClure's run by two terrific "investigative editors." All of these people share the conviction that news is what's hidden, everything else is publicity. And let me salute some of the muckraking films that I wish I had produced: Michael Moore's *Sicko* and *Capitalism: A Love Story*, Charles Ferguson's *Inside Job*, and Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Dark Side*.

The most important thing the giant philanthropies could do—Gates, Rockefeller, Ford, Open Society Institute, and new ones emerging—would be to create a \$2-to-\$3 billion Trust for Independent Journalism. They wouldn't miss the money, and democracy would still have a fighting chance because of their investment.

Q: In your long list of investigative reports, which ones had the biggest impact in terms of changing public opinion and public policy?

Moyers: *Trade Secrets* [a 2001 exposé of the chemical industry]. We dug into the industry's own archives to show how big chemical companies had deliberately withheld from workers and consumers damaging information about toxic chemicals in their products. The corruption was so deep and pervasive it was almost impossible to get our arms around it. But we did—thanks to a terrific producer, Sherry Jones—and it was so threatening to the industry that the companies struck back with a vicious counterattack. For one thing, it proved that I had the best funders an independent journalist could wish for! Every one of them—the foundations and my sole corporate funder for twenty-five years now, Mutual of America—refused to buckle when the chemical industry came after us. The industry hired a notorious public relations firm in Washington—staffed with private detectives and former CIA, FBI, and drug enforcement officers—to conduct a scurrilous campaign against us. But everything we reported held up, and a year later the documentary won an Emmy for outstanding investigative journalism.

Another favorite is *In Our Children's Food*, a Frontline documentary Marty Koughan and I produced that exposed how the chemical industry was attempting secretly to dilute the findings of a National Academy of Sciences study on the effects of pesticides on children. Even before it aired, the industry waged a campaign to discredit it, including a whispering campaign among TV critics who were likely to review it. A *Washington Post* columnist attacked it on the morning of the day it aired—without having seen it. He later confessed personally to me that his source was a top industry lobbyist! And believe it or not, even the American Cancer Society distributed harsh talking points about the broadcast before it aired—talking points provided by a public relations firm that worked for several chemical companies while doing pro bono work for the Society. After all that, I was pleased when the documentary won an Emmy for investigative journalism.

It's very difficult to measure the impact on policy of any investigative journalism. You hope it matters to let a little more truth loose in the world, but you can't always be sure it does. You do it because there's a story to be told. I can tell you that the job of trying to tell the truth about people whose job it is to hide the truth is about as complicated and difficult as trying to hide it in the first place. Unless you're willing to fight and refight the same battles until you go blue in the face, drive the people you work with nuts going over every detail to make certain you've got it right, and then take hit after unfair hit accusing you of bias, there's no use even trying. You have to love it, and I do. You just hope it strikes a spark somewhere in the critical mass of public opinion and helps some people to resist further the seductions of political and corporate advertising.

So I tell young people in this work: Stay humble. One of our most powerful documentaries—Capitol Crimes, about the Jack Abramoff scandal—nailed how the youthful Grover Norquist and Ralph Reed came to Washington to lead a revolution and wound up running a racket. They're still at it.

Q: We've always had an upper class in America. What's different now?

Moyers: The rich today are richer, there are more of them, they have round-the-clock propaganda factories in Rupert Murdoch's empire and rightwing talk radio, and corporate media have their back. The massive upward distribution of wealth engineered by our political class over the last few decades has solidified the plutocratic control of the rule-making machinery in Washington and state capitals. The Supreme Court consistently favors organized money and the political privileges of the corporate class. We have a Senate that is more responsive to affluent constituents than to middle-class constituents, while the opinions of constituents in the bottom third of income distribution have no apparent effect at all on the Senate's roll call votes.

One of our two major parties is dominated by extremists dedicated to destroying the social contract, and the other party has been so enfeebled by two decades of collaboration with the donor class it can offer only feeble resistance to the forces that are devastating everyday people. Our economy is a plantation run for the aristocrats—the CEOs, hedge funds, private equity firms—while the field hands are left with the scraps. Go see Robert Reich's documentary *Inequality for All*. It's all right there.

Q: Some journalists and scholars think that the Tea Party is losing influence. Do you agree?

Moyers: They aren't going away. Anyone who thinks they are hasn't been to Texas or North Carolina lately. These zealots have dragged the delusional in from the margin and installed it as the motor driving their party.

Q: You've been pretty critical of President Obama. Do you think he's trapped in a system that stifles his progressive instincts—or that he's not really that progressive in the first place?

Moyers: I don't know what's in Obama's heart. How progressive was he? Was he sincere in those eloquent speeches? Who can say? I think that in many respects LBJ would find him a kindred spirit, especially on winning incremental reforms that further enlarge democracy. I have to confess, though, that the President strikes me as a man of strong principles and weak convictions—the kind of guy who would rather teach constitutional law than practice it, or who'd rather watch the match alone on TV than arm-wrestle his opponents.

There's hardly a more bitter pill to take than when a President disappoints the people who most believed in him. I can't forget the anguish of all those people who voted for Lyndon Johnson thinking they were voting against a wider war. So when we were covering the 2008 campaign I told my young African American colleagues that despite the historical significance of victory, he was going to break their hearts. They didn't want to hear that, and they refused to believe it. Eighteen months later they started dropping by one by one to say, sadly: "He broke our hearts." A couple of them even wept.

It's not just that Obama compromised too easily. He treated too lightly the people and forces determined to destroy him. They spat in his face and didn't even get ticketed for a misdemeanor. You may remember that soon after his election in 2008, he went to Washington to have dinner with elite conservative pundits who had done everything in their power to defeat him and would in time do everything in their power to destroy him. That was the tip-off. He seemed to think he could win over his enemies. He certainly seemed to believe too much in his own powers of persuasion. One thing's for sure—he misunderstood the nature of his adversaries. Fate handed him the best of all political gifts—a dyspeptic, surly, spiteful opposition on the one hand and very unpopular financiers on the other—and he wouldn't come out punching, name names, or go for the jugular. It was as if while getting mugged by guys with brass knuckles, he turned the other cheek. He even jeopardized his pledge to preserve women's rights under *Roe v. Wade* in order to get a health care bill written by the corporate lapdog Max Baucus and the gang of revolving door mercenaries he hired to write a bill friendly to industry. The President should have taken Baucus behind the shed and read him the riot act. Instead, he's sending him to China as ambassador. Go figure.

And now the candidate who campaigned for transparency is the President defending secret negotiations on new trade agreements that are largely being written by corporate lawyers and lobbyists. He would give corporations the key to the treasury while he gets the authority to fast track another hammering of working people and the environment. Yet the only people who get a real tongue-lashing from this President's White House are progressives around town who dare to call him on the carpet for abandoning his promises. He's

waited too long to show the spunk he did in his recent State of the Union speech in finally telling the Republicans to shove off.

Q: What did you admire about LBJ?

Moyers: Lyndon Johnson was thirteen of the most interesting and difficult men I ever met. He could be as couth as he was uncouth, as magnanimous as malicious, at times proud and sensitive, at times paranoid and darkly uneasy with himself. Freud would have had a field day with him.

But I was there during those years when he had resolved to finish what FDR—whom he called “my second daddy”—had started: a strong social contract. He believed the poor deserved a better life than the economy was providing them. He thought private power and greed had to be checked by a vibrant democracy.

I was also there when he seized unexpected moments and made the most of them by doing the right thing. When he did the wrong thing—the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, invading the Dominican Republic, escalating in Vietnam—he remained the Cold Warrior, impulsively acting on unexamined premises and like-minded advisers.

Q: What’s your view of the political influence of the conservative echo chamber, such as Fox News and Rush Limbaugh?

Moyers: They have raised ignorance to ideology and stupefied an entire political party. No more roguish and rowdy band of predators ever did more to demean and despoil the democracy on whose carcass they feed.

Q: You seem to have moved steadily to the left in the past decade—not only in your public comments and articles but also in your public ties to progressive groups. Is this an accurate assessment? If so, what inspired this leftward shift?

Moyers: Journalism’s been a continuing course in adult education for me. And I’ve lived long enough to see the triumph of zealots and absolutists, to watch money swallow politics, to witness the rise of the corporate state. See the party of working and poor people become a sycophant of crony capitalism. Watch the union of church and state become fashionable again. Witness the coupling of news and entertainment. See everyday people cast overboard as the pirates and predators of Wall Street seized the ship of state. I didn’t drift; I moved left just by standing still.

Q: Do you see any hopeful signs that America is ready to challenge the plutocracy and restore more democracy?

Moyers: The most encouraging sign is that 71 percent of the public believe the system is profoundly corrupted by the power of money. Ninety-six percent of the people believe it's "important" that we reduce the influence of money. Yet 91 percent think it's "not likely" that its influence will be lessened. Think about that: People know what's right to do yet don't think it can or will be done. When the public loses faith in democracy's ability to solve the problems it has created for itself, the game's almost over. And I think we are this close to losing democracy to the mercenary class.

There are people fighting back—that's encouraging. Bill de Blasio's victory in New York came about because long years of work by community organizers and advocates laid the groundwork for fighting back against the policies that rolled out the hospitality mat for billionaires and plutocrats while increasing the number of poor people.

What today's activists—the low-wage workers fighting Walmart, the immigrant rights activists, the Moral Monday activists in North Carolina, those fast-food workers who have stirred admiration and collegiality among serfs at large, and many more—have in common is a conviction once expressed by Robert La Follette: "Democracy is a life, and requires daily struggle." If it weren't for them, I would despair. There's a scene in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* when the anarchist grows despondent over whether even the detonation of a bomb might arouse Londoners: "What if nothing could move them?" he asks. It's the people who are doing the nonviolent organizing at the grassroots that make me think there's still hope.

Peter Dreier teaches politics at Occidental College. His latest book is "The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame" (Nation Books, 2012).

- See more at: <http://www.progressive.org/bill-moyers#sthash.lGil5tjp.dpuf>