

The Salon Interview: Bill Moyers

The conscience of American journalism speaks his mind about Bush, LBJ, Iraq, Vietnam, the triumph of America's global power and the withering of its democracy.

By Andrew O'Hehir

To say that Bill Moyers is an exceptional case among former White House press secretaries is almost to damn him with faint praise. Love him or loathe him, Moyers has become one of the most recognizable and celebrated journalists in television history since leaving President Lyndon B. Johnson's staff in 1967, at the height of the Vietnam War.

Some on the left have never quite forgiven Moyers for his role as the voice of LBJ's fateful Vietnam escalation, an experience he still talks about with sharp regret. But he is far better known for his subsequent work, especially his questing, long-form interviews with world leaders and deep thinkers, in the all-but-forgotten tradition of legendary CBS newsmen Edward R. Murrow. Moyers is the intellectual's version of Barbara Walters—or rather, Walters is the celebrity-struck populist's version of him.

It's fair to say that other occupants of Moyers' old job have not become quite so prominent in later life. Most have traded on their fading celebrity to garner more or less respectable perches somewhere in the intertwining thickets of public relations, finance, law, publishing and policy-think. Jody Powell, once Jimmy Carter's press secretary, now heads a Washington P.R. firm, which is pretty much the default setting. (He deserves special credit for once having poured a glass of red wine on Sam Donaldson aboard Air Force One.) Former Clinton flack Dee Dee Myers, a professional talking head and consultant, and onetime Reagan/George H.W. Bush spokesman Marlin Fitzwater (the only press secretary appointed by two different presidents), have at least been having fun; both have worked as consultants on "The West Wing."

Gerald Ford's onetime press secretary, Ron Nessen, tried to resume his career in broadcasting. He once hosted something called "The TV Book Shop" on the Nostalgia channel, whatever that is or was. (Nessen actually has a perfectly honorable job now, directing P.R. for the Brookings Institution.) Then there's the case of former Nixon press secretary Ron Ziegler, who died in February. Only Reagan spokesman Larry Speakes can challenge Ziegler's supremacy as the all-time West Wing misleader and prevaricator (although don't rule out current occupant Ari Fleischer). Ziegler followed his disgraced boss into exile, and then got to find out what purgatory was like while he was still alive, spending 11 years as chief executive of the National Association of Chain Drug Stores.

It's tempting to suggest that the combination of noble ambition and tragic miscalculation that characterized the Johnson White House acted as the spur to Moyers' later journalistic career, with its blend of skepticism and open-minded search for the Big Idea. He himself says that his experience with LBJ, and his childhood in the segregated South, were the defining events of his life.

Since first going into television in 1971, Moyers has produced and hosted hundreds of hours of programming for both CBS News and PBS (exclusively for the latter since 1986). His themes have been consistently large and general: religious faith, the United States Constitution, the power of storytelling, the nature of artistic creativity, freedom vs. secrecy, addiction and recovery, death and dying, bigotry and hatred, poverty and inequality, the corruption of democracy and, pervading it all, the question of America, its history, identity and destiny. It may be easy to make fun of his endless series of interviews with the pseudo-Jungian myth-chronicler Joseph Campbell, a PBS fundraising gold mine of the '80s, but the ideas aired were actually far from juvenile and their influence on the culture was immense. (On the other hand, the less said about Moyers' special "A Gathering of Men With Robert Bly," the better.)

Rather than mellowing with age, Moyers, now 68, has arguably become the lone radical on television, openly challenging our national failure to confront fundamental issues of class, money and power. On his current magazine-style show, “NOW With Bill Moyers” (which airs Friday nights on PBS), he has the same shock of schoolboy hair—now completely white—and the same air of polite, bespectacled concern as ever. He still looks and sounds like the über-square Texas divinity student and ordained Baptist minister he once was.

“NOW” sometimes indulges in the wandering, sweet-natured interviews with poets and artists that have always been part of Moyers’ *métier*, and occasional segments—like an October tribute to a Seattle Latino community center—seem like defiant examples of old-school political correctness. (In a media landscape dominated by the likes of Rush Limbaugh and Bill O’Reilly—who has feuded publicly with Moyers—why the hell not?)

But the program’s real strength is its political and economic reporting and its ability to look beneath the surface of current events, which have always been the areas where Moyers’ unquestioned intelligence is put to best use. He and his affiliated teams of reporters—Moyers’ prestige allows him to work in concert with such other journalistic institutions as National Public Radio, the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times*—have uncovered scandalous corporate handouts hidden in “free trade” agreements, the continuing evisceration of campaign-finance reform, rebellions against privatization in Latin America, the consolidation of media ownership, the pharmaceutical industry’s ad blitz and offshore tax shelters for corporate fat cats.

Although he insists he is a political independent, and not a Democrat or a “liberal,” Moyers makes no secret of his contempt for the secretive crony-fest of the Bush administration (or rather both Bush administrations, which he sees as an interrupted hereditary regime), his opposition to military intervention in the Middle East and his distrust of the “corporate conservative hegemony” he believes is strangling American political life. (Somehow Moyers can say that phrase and make it sound reasonable, where you or I would come off as a raving Leninist, even if we believe it’s accurate.)

I think the secret to Bill Moyers’ success is not merely his benevolent, avuncular manner but his gentle, almost singsong, folksy-yet-learned delivery (which he says he absorbed from the storytelling tradition of rural East Texas, where he was raised). If his writing can occasionally seem mannered, it also has a poetic verve and grace almost unknown in television. Here’s how he ended a recent broadcast, ruminating on the ancient resonance of the headline “Marines cross Euphrates”:

“And on these stones is all that remain of conquests, rebellions and battles—the violent death of rulers—prisoners of war disposed of by execution. For 5,000 years the story repeats itself, the victory of one, the defeat of the other. Tribes and gods turn on each other. Even Genghis Khan met his match trying to get here. The last word has always been written in the sand. Cities and states lie buried beneath it. The great figures who once held sway here—Ashurnasirpal II, Tiglath-Pileser III, Shamshi-Adad V, King Nino, Queen Semiramis, King Shar-kali-sharri, Suleyman the Magnificent, the Ottomans, the British—have all been carried away. Five thousand years from now, who will be crossing the Euphrates? What will remain from our time? And what will be remembered?”

Without much hope of answering these questions, I recently joined Moyers for a chat in the sixth-floor office at WNET in New York where he and his wife of 49 years, Judith Davidson Moyers, run their production company, Public Affairs Television. His bookcases are stacked with Emmy Awards, although, in fairness, only a dozen or so of the 30-plus he has won seem to be on display. Wearing a rumpled Ralph Lauren dress shirt, he sat down opposite me, offered me a Diet Coke, and began to ask probing, Moyers-esque questions about me and about Salon. Eventually, however, I got him to move on to other topics: the state of journalism today, radical Islam and globalization,

and the failing health of American democracy.

Q: When you look around at American journalism right now, how are we doing on reporting the war in Iraq and its repercussions around the world?

If you look hard enough, you can find a variety of information and insight. But you have to look hard, you have to create your own kaleidoscope. That's what I think is both exhausting all of us and confusing all of us. If you watch the BBC you'll get a different approach from any of the American networks. But you have to watch those American networks in order to judge the BBC.

Then you have to turn to the Internet and the alternative press. It does seem to be a constantly turning kaleidoscope. If you keep turning it long enough, and you get the right angle so the light's just right, you get a good sense of the whole. But I don't know where the typical citizen, who's not working at what I work at all day—trying to make sense of it—turns to get an overview.

You have to watch Al-Jazeera, which I do here. You have to read Romenesko and you have to read the BBC Web site and the Washington Post, all of it. It's a full-time job, editing your own virtual newspaper every day. I go to Editor & Publisher, and I find help from their coverage of the media coverage. I go to some of the committed, ideological Web sites, whether it's Brent Bozell on the right or FAIR [Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting] on the left. I compose my own front page every day, and my own arts section and my own war coverage.

For a professional journalist, it's media heaven. But for the typical citizen, it must be very confusing. For those who settle on one thing, for those who settle on Fox News, where journalism becomes nationalism becomes chauvinism, if that's the only place you're getting information, you're not going to have any overall view. You have to work at it. It puts a great burden on the citizen. But the alternative is to have just three networks, as we did once upon a time.

My impression is that the buildup to the war, and the first few weeks of the war, were all driven by the government's mission and the government's definition of what is news. Most of us were letting the official view of reality set our agenda. As the war has gone on and news has happened out there, we're beginning to get more important pieces, pieces that are much at odds with the official view of reality.

Q: Do you think the major news institutions that most of us rely on—the Big Three networks, CNN, the New York Times—are beginning to do independent reporting, rather than just reacting to the government view of events?

I don't think they're reporting independently, no. I think what's happening is that other people are reacting to the government and they're able to justify what they're doing by reporting on what those other people are saying and doing that is at odds with the government. I don't think there's a lot of independent, entrepreneurial journalism which says, let's really ask if Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations is accurate or not. Once somebody does that—an independent journalist in Britain gets on the Internet and tracks down that graduate student who wrote the heart of that piece 12 years ago—everybody else picks it up. But I don't find the big, mainstream organizations doing entrepreneurial journalism. They accept the official version of reality, although I guess they accept it skeptically. They take it, play it and then hope somebody else challenges it so they can then say, "There's a debate about this."

Q: How do you feel about "embedded reporters," a phrase that's now, I guess a permanent entry in the journalistic lexicon?

It's not as good as what we did in the Vietnam War. Remember, I was in the Johnson White House at that time. We made a very conscious decision that reporters were to go where they wanted to go. Sometimes they had to go with the military because there was no other way to get there. But Johnson was actually presented with a recommendation

from the Pentagon—we didn't think to call it "embedded," but it would have created the same situation. He said we shouldn't put that kind of limit on them. He railed against the press! He loathed the press, when they reported information that was at odds with him. But it was an important moment in journalistic history, because we didn't try to manage the press. We challenged the press, and we would snipe at the press, but we didn't try to manage the press.

Of course things got worse after that: the incursions in Panama and Grenada, and Gulf War I. It was total censorship. So this is an improvement over what has been happening. But it's not as good as Vietnam, where reporters had total and unrestricted access. Morley Safer was out there filming GIs torching huts with their lighters. He wasn't embedded; he just went along. Or Peter Arnett, who was then working for A.P. out of Asia; he could go where he wanted to.

So this is an improvement, and I greatly admire the courage and bravery of people who are embedded. I wish I knew that I had that kind of courage. I mean, I've covered minor wars. I went to Central America, I went to Africa. But I've never been exposed to the kind of fire that these guys are being exposed to.

It does mean that you're seeing through the eyes of the military. That's a problem, in a sense. But it's an advantage over anything else we've seen in the last 20 to 25 years. The other disadvantage is that you see what that unit of military is seeing, and you *only* see that.

But I'm glad the military is doing it. Overall, it's a plus. It's better to be there (in the field) than not to be there, relying only on military briefings, which is what we got in Gulf War I.

Q: You mention your experience in the White House during Vietnam. We've started to hear people talk about parallels between this conflict and that one. Now, it doesn't seem possible that this war will go on even a fraction that long. But what parallels, or lack of parallels, do you see?

I think it's a very dangerous analogy, particularly on the military front. I don't believe there's any way the United States will get bogged down in Iraq for five, 10, 12 years. I'm no military expert, but I don't think that can happen. I mean, only Baghdad is left. One way or another, you can wait them out or go in and then weed them out. Militarily, we're not there for a long time.

Now, politically I think the analogy works. I heard Jim Webb, the former secretary of the Navy, who was in Vietnam as a Marine and worked for the "MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour" 20 years ago, on CBS the other day. Bob Schieffer asked him, "You wrote this big piece that was skeptical of the war, back in September for the Washington Post. Why?" Jim Webb said, "I covered Lebanon for the 'News Hour' [when a U.S. Marine barracks was blown up, killing 241 soldiers]. And I came out and I realized we should never be in this region permanently. This is not like any other part of the world."

I heard a terrific interview on NPR's "On the Media" yesterday with a British journalist I've never heard of—I'm trying to track him down—who said that this is having a profound unintended consequence. It's creating the first real pan-Arabism he had seen in a long time.

Q: Since Nasser, maybe.

That's exactly what he said. So politically, the analogy with Vietnam is appropriate. Although we got out of Vietnam politically at the same time we got out militarily, we will *not* be able to get out of the Middle East politically at the same time we get out of Iraq militarily. The whole issue of reconstruction and nation-building that they're talking about, although I'm not sure how serious that is, could bog us down for a long time.

I did a little piece at the end of last week's broadcast, a little essay. I saw the headline, "Marines cross the Euphrates." And it just hit me, because my graduate work was in

theology and I had to take five years of Greek, so I studied all that history—so did Alexander the Great! So I went back to the books and, sure enough, 5,000 years ago the story is the same. The defeat of this one, the victory of that one. The Marines cross the Euphrates, but the United States will not be able to get out. And the last word is always written in the sand.

So yes, the military analogy breaks down—there's no way Iraq can hold out for 10 years or five years or even a year. But you can be in an Israeli-like situation in the Middle East that will make life very, very miserable.

And every day we're there increases the pan-Arabism, gives the other side, the extremist Muslims, their argument. The Saudis are allowing their press, which is very controlled, to start chastising America. And the clerics in Saudi Arabia, who've been kept quiet since 9/11, have been allowed to go back to the pulpit and castigate America. At the same time, the targeting of Iraq is taking place from an underground bunker in Saudi Arabia. I mean, the Saudis are playing both ends against each other. That may last for the moment. But one of the main reasons that Osama bin Laden and the extremist Muslims give for their resentment of America is the stationing of American troops near the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. We didn't have anything like that situation in Vietnam.

Q: Is this period of history—the collapse of communism and the triumph of global capitalism, the troublesome 2000 election, moving through 9/11 to the current crisis—one of those fulcrums of history that our children or grandchildren will look back on and say, that changed the direction of the world?

I believe that. I won't be around to see it, but I definitely believe this is a defining period of history. The last third of the 20th century created a kind of political certainty in the world, in this sense: There was the Cold War, which enabled two superpowers, wary of each other, to keep the other stable, to keep the other checked. There was a delicate balance—there was the Cuban missile crisis, the Berlin airlift—but the Cold War kept velvet gloves over much of the world. There were lots of bad things happening, but it did keep a certain kind of equilibrium in the world.

The other great phenomenon that came in the last half of the 20th century was the rise of the welfare state, with the sense of obligation growing out of the collapse of capitalism in the 1920s—we had certain obligations one to another, there was a need for the government to intervene to correct gross inequalities in income and health and opportunity.

Both of those have gone now. The Cold War is over and the United States has risen as the great military power, which always brings consequences that powers don't want. And the collapse of the social contract—the rise of the right wing, the rise of the corporate right and the political right in this country, which exercises hegemony now over our government—is turning the market into every man for himself. Those two forces, disorder in the world and disorder at home, are creating appetites and responses and challenges and frustrations and angers and passions and winners and losers, and nobody can anticipate how they will reshape themselves. And the other factor, of course, is the rise of Islamic uniformity or conformity or whatever one wants to call it.

Yeah, I think we are in a very disturbing period. I've never seen anything like it. I've lived through the Depression, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, the rise of the conservative movement, the nuclear age, all of these changes. I've never seen anything like this.

Q: You bring up Islamic fundamentalism, and we hear a lot of different things about that. Some people argue it's actually on the wane, while others, including some on the left like Paul Berman, feel that it's the new face of fascism. Do you feel that extreme Islam is actually the primary force opposing the United States and global capitalism right now?

I don't think it's the dominant force. I think fundamentalism is found around the world, whether in the Jewish occupation of the West Bank or the rise of the religious right in this country or Islamic fundamentalism, although they're not all necessarily the same. What we're seeing is the inevitable backlash to globalization, to the dominance of American ideas and American money and American goods and services. That's what's creating the backlash. Militant Islam gives it its front teeth, gives a bite to it.

We covered a story on "Now" last year about the backlash in Bolivia to the efforts by Bechtel to privatize the water supply. That was very powerful, what happened there—10,000 people rising up to protest the privatization of water! We would never have heard about that, probably, or factored it into our considerations of world dynamics. But once the teeth of Islam snapped on 9/11, all of us begin to wake up to other things going on in the world. Why aren't we seen as the benevolent force that we think of ourselves as? The benign force that Thomas Friedman wrote about in "The Lexus and the Olive Tree," assuming that's what the world wanted.

We suddenly discovered that this increasing inequality is not what the world wanted. We did a piece about Arundhati Roy in India—here's a novelist who forgoes writing, to become an activist to stop these huge dams that were being built and displacing millions of people in central Asia. It turned out Enron had a big role in that, using American influence to bribe government officials. We probably wouldn't have paid much attention to that until we woke up on 9/11, specifically in regard to the terrorists, but also in regard to others out there. We began to look at ourselves in a mirror that they had thrust in our face.

I think most extremist groups run their gamut, and the Wahhabists and the others will also, although we're facing a long, tough time. I think the real phenomenon that is reshaping our world is that globalization breeds such inequalities. There is bound to be a reaction to it on many fronts.

Q: OK, so here's what your friend Bill O'Reilly and the other guys at Fox News will say if they read this interview: Moyers just came out and admitted that the al-Qaida terrorists and the anti-globalization activists and the antiwar protesters are all on the same team. They all hate capitalism and hate America.

There are centrifugal forces at work here. There are counterforces at work here. There is clearly and ostensibly a reaction to dissent in this country in the most conspicuous way. Clear Channel organizes to arouse patriots to oppose antiwar demonstrators. Magid Associates advises radio and television stations around the country to play the national anthem, show the flag. Fox News taunts the demonstrators on Fifth Avenue during the protests and its ratings rise.

The right has been doing this for some time. The effectiveness of the right's echo chamber has been that every time the Democrats dissent, or people protest, they had this megaphone that was able to drown them out, make them seem "liberal," taint them with that word. There's an inevitable wartime pulling of the strings, to paint anyone as unpatriotic who disagrees with the war.

But if you go to the Web, there are so many new fronts of dissent opening up all the time. You can close the windows, you can pull down the shade, you can leave your car in the garage, but you can't keep pollution from auto emissions from coming into your house. That's the way dissent is. I mean, it's a huge phenomenon around the world.

Q: Obviously George W. Bush has particular problems with the rest of the world, but is there a way for any U.S. president in this era of American dominance to be healer or bridge-builder?

This is the most disturbing consequence of the hegemony that has been achieved over our political institutions by (right-wing) ideology and money right now. I lived through one of the most fortuitous and dangerous periods in American history—World War

II and the postwar era, when the Soviet Union became a Goliath and we lived under the umbrella of the nuclear threat—and our political leadership responded splendidly in that period. Whether it was Truman or Eisenhower, they understood. Eisenhower in particular understood—he was a conservative, but he was moderate in the use of power.

The Republicans I remember from my days in Washington—the moderate Republicans—along with the moderate Democrats, were able to forge a bipartisan foreign policy that worked. It had its problems, but it worked. If I had been George W. Bush, I would have asked Al Gore to become head of homeland security. I would have asked Bill Bradley to become the planner for the reconstruction of Iraq.

It is a real problem for someone who by nature is a lone ranger. I think that George W. Bush is like that, he sees America as the Lone Ranger in the world, so he pulls out of this treaty and that treaty, one treaty after another. He isolates himself in the world at a time when we need the world. I do not understand this.

This period certainly does test political leadership. If Al Gore had been in the White House on 9/11, it would have tested him. Who knows how he would have reacted? But I would hope Gore would have seen, as I hoped Bush would see, that this transcends all politics. We need to create a leadership that represents the fullness of American life to confront a world that is in great disorder.

Q: Doesn't that phrase, "the fullness of American life," remind us that Americans come from all over the world, and that perhaps more than any other country we are tied to the world? Of course it was the United States that was attacked on 9/11, but people from 40 or so different countries died in those towers. That seems to have been forgotten.

I'm still not sure it was an attack on America as much as it was an attack on the power of money and the power of commerce to change and challenge theology and ideology. Yeah, sure, they saw America as the Great Satan. But nobody stopped until much later to realize that they hit the United Nations down there, just not a building.

Q: It was the United Nations of capitalism.

Exactly. It was the good side of globalization. I wish we could get rid of that word. I'd like to say that the protesters and the activists are not opposed to globalization as much as they're for global justice. And the United States is in a great position to take leadership in presenting the best side of our character, which is that we are drawn from the world, and now we can give back to the world.

I just did a six-hour series, five years in the making, on the Chinese in America. I thought the timing would be unfortunate, but it turned out to be fortuitous. This is the first series I've ever done, in 30 years, in which I actually found the answer to the question that provoked me to do it. I wanted to find out what the Chinese had to say about becoming American, about the American dream.

One woman I interviewed, out of the dozens of people I spoke with while making that series, explained it all to me. She began to talk to me about eating chicken feet. You've seen chicken feet in Chinese restaurants, right?

Q: Yeah. They're terrifying.

Well, yes, they're ugly, they don't look particularly nutritious, people are squeamish about them. She said to me, "As an American, I can eat chicken feet. But I don't have to eat chicken feet. I can turn around and eat at McDonald's and nobody questions me." I said to her, "What the hell does that have to do with the American dream?" She says, "That *is* the American dream! That I can compose my own life. That I can invent who I want to be."

We are creating a new American identity, and to take our identity as being opposed to the world, instead of being *of* the world, is the greatest mistake that George W. Bush has made.

Q: Obviously the country has been over and over this, and maybe it's a moot point now. But what do you make of the case the president made for going to war in Iraq?

I thought he did a good thing in going to the U.N. and getting Resolution 1441. I believe in international law, and I've been troubled that U.N. resolutions are not enforced. I thought it was working. It was slow and costly, but it was working. Saddam Hussein was isolated. The inspectors were back, and we had the world more or less with us. You know, I think if we had tried diplomacy in Vietnam, and let politics play out more, we would have come to a better end there.

I think Bush did the right thing in identifying Saddam Hussein. Not in relation to al-Qaida—I don't think they've proven that connection and I don't think it exists, I think that's a different kind of society. But American liberal democracy should never stand by idle when someone like Saddam Hussein or Idi Amin or Milosevic is wreaking such havoc on his own people. I thought he was doing it the right way and I think it would have worked.

So I think Bush did the right thing in going to the U.N. and did the wrong thing by not playing it out patiently.

Q: What's your assessment of George W. Bush's character?

I never pay much attention to the character of a president. I learned this from Lyndon Johnson, who was 13 of the most difficult people I've ever known. He was the best dancer in the White House since George Washington, but he could also be the most uncouth man the next morning. He could be generous and tolerant, he could be scathing and unforgiving. None of those mattered to me, compared to what the policies were. A president is there to make the best decisions for all of us that he can, and we should judge him by his decisions.

I've read the transcripts of Nixon's tapes and I can see that he was brought down by his paranoia, by his obsession with his enemies. If that's character, it's revealing. But I really look at a president's public persona and at the consequences of a president's choices. This president, whatever his character, is making choices whose winners are primarily the people who can win, the people who are ahead, at the expense of the people who are not. His character is not the issue to me. His policies are.

Q: One of the striking things about your show is that you've consistently been covering the troubling economic consequences of major policy decisions made by the Bush administration—and actually the Clinton administration too. You've exposed the fundamentally undemocratic character of much of the neoliberal free-trade agenda—GATT, Chapter 11 of NAFTA, Bush's fast-track trade agreements—well before the mainstream media noticed widespread corruption in the business world. Is there a danger that we're just going to forget about economic justice in the context of war and terrorism?

Yes. As has been said, this is both a war to seek weapons of mass destruction and a war of mass distraction. There are fundamental political changes taking place that are not being reported and not being debated under the cloak of war. Forty-four million people are uninsured; our healthcare situation is in terrible shape. There's growing inequality in our country. Then there's what's happening to the environment. We can make a lot of mistakes in public policy—we can make a mistake in tax policy and change it. We can make a mistake in labor policy and change it. We can make a mistake on housing and change it. But when you make mistakes on the environment, you can't change that. That's irreparable damage.

I did a two-hour broadcast two years ago called "Earth on the Edge," in which I looked at what nonpartisan research scientists were saying about us reaching the tipping point. They say that if we don't reverse certain trends by 2004, 2006, it's too late. When

you lose that open space, it's gone. When you lose that wetland, it's gone. There's a lot of these—they're not mistakes, they're deliberate policies of the Bush administration—from which we will not be able to recover. Those are deeply troubling to me. These things are being done without debate from the Democratic Party, coverage by the press or awareness on the part of citizens.

Q: You're saying that George W. Bush is a dangerous president.

This is a presidency that is fundamentally changing the nature and character of American government. It's the most anti-government administration of my lifetime. I believe in our collective responsibility. I grew up in an America where that made a difference to my parents, made a difference to my community, made a difference to my culture. You have to go back to Warren G. Harding to find an administration that so opened the doors to its cronies to come in and exploit the public resources. That's very troubling.

I don't have any personal feelings about George W. Bush, any more than I did about Bill Clinton. I looked at Bill Clinton from the standpoint of his policies, and I had a lot of trouble with them.

I think my life, and certainly my career in journalism, have been informed by two things. One was being a Southerner. Whenever you learned about Southern life, you realize that when we drove the truth-tellers out of the pulpits, out of the editorial rooms and out of the classrooms—people who were telling the truth about slavery—that politics failed and we wound up in the Civil War, from which we still haven't recovered. We were still dealing with the aftermath of the Civil War in the 1960s, when I was in government.

Q: We're still dealing with it now.

Oh, yeah. This is another subject that's off the table—race! But being a Southerner informed me about what happens when a society closes the wagons around itself, when it doesn't tolerate good journalism or prophecy in the pulpit or truth-telling in the classroom.

The other thing was being a part of the Johnson administration, where we pulled the wagons around us on Vietnam, and we—the government, the administration and the country—paid a terrible price for that. So my journalism has grown steadily to be very skeptical, in the public interest, of any hegemony of thought or uniformity of ideology that's in charge. I'm deeply troubled by the lack of debate in the country, by the suppression of dissent, by the secrecy.

I fought hard for the Freedom of Information Act when I was in the White House. Johnson signed it; he hated it, but he signed it because Congressman [John] Moss just insisted. It was a great victory for openness in government. Every journalist will tell you that, every author will tell you that, every scientist will tell you that. And now, this is becoming the most secretive administration in American history, much more so even than during the Civil War.

Cheney last week was given full power by Bush to classify everything he wants. This is very troubling; this is a man who's indifferent to democracy, if not hostile to it. He's certainly hostile to transparency. He allows the energy industry to come in and write his energy bill, he talks to them about the oil fields in Iraq, yet all the records are closed. The main reason behind what they're doing with secrecy is to make it very difficult to follow their footprints on the policies that the first Bush and second Bush administrations are making.

It's a troubling time. They will regret it, just as we (in the Johnson administration) regretted it. And the country will pay for it, just as the country paid for our transgressions.

Q: Why aren't we hearing more from the Democratic Party about this whole range of issues?

I think the primary reason is that the Democratic Party has bought into the same thing. It is as obligated to corporate fundraising, to money, as the Republicans. They have to raise as much money as the Republicans do, and they go to essentially the same sources for it: wealthy, privileged people, the 1 percent of this country that contributes most of the money to political campaigns. So the interests of the donor class come to dominate both parties. The people who get your attention once you're in office are not the people who voted for you but the people who paid for your price of admission.

Now, the Democrats have an old tradition, going back to the middle of the last century: labor and environmentalists and others. This country's history has been a seesaw between the power of organized money and the power of organized people. And there's been a balance. Now there is no real balance. It's money, private money, that is the dominant influence over public policy. And the Democrats go to the same trough as the Republicans do. That diminishes their ability to challenge the corporate conservative coalition that is now running the country.

That's one thing. The other thing is, just look at Lyndon Johnson and his reluctant decision to go to war. He, more than anybody else, as the tapes now show, had his doubts. But he remembered what happened in 1950 to '52, when McCarthy and the Republicans accused the Democrats of treason. Johnson was determined that would never happen to him. Kennedy, in '61 and '62, was just as determined that he, as a Democrat, would never be accused of being soft on our enemies. Today the Democrats are worried that if they do the wrong thing and oppose the war, they will pay the price in 2004. That's why, before the election last year, Tom Daschle led the effort to give almost unanimous approval to the resolution on Iraq. Let's pass it, he said, and move on to more important things. What did he mean by that? He meant the election, which they lost anyway.

Q: Speaking of elections, let's touch on a subject where there's still a lot of bitterness among Democrats: Ralph Nader. People like me who voted for Nader in 2000 are still hearing about it from Democrats, how those 2.8 million votes cost Al Gore the White House. What's your perspective on that, especially since you think the Bush presidency has been so disastrous for the country?

I've always thought third parties played a valuable role in American political life. They release tension, for one thing. They release stress. They bring ideas in.

I thought Ross Perot running was a good thing. The Democrats were *never* going to deal with the deficit. I'm not a Democrat, I'm an independent, and I had gotten so disgusted with the Democrats when they had hegemony in Congress and refused to deal with the deficit. We would never have dealt with the deficits in the early '90s if Perot hadn't gotten his little chalkboard out and bought the TV time and went out there and educated enough American people that suddenly we began to see what was happening with this endless spending.

It took Perot to do that, and I thought Nader running would force the two parties to confront some issues. One thing his candidacy did was expose the hegemony of the two parties over the political rules in this country. It's a calamity the way they have become a racket to protect their own interests. But I wrote to him and urged him to run as a Democrat. I thought that inside the debates in New Hampshire and Iowa, he would get his ideas out in a way that would be politically realistic.

I can't condemn him for running. I believe in the pluralism of ideas and the competition of democracy. Having said all that, however, while I agree with Nader that Gore *lost* the election, I still think it's a reality that Nader's race probably did cost Gore the electoral votes he needed for a clean victory. That isn't to say it judgmentally, just to say there are consequences.

Q: When you interviewed Nader last August, you actually got him to admit that there are differences between the Democrats and the Republicans.

Well, there are differences. I said that earlier. Both parties are largely beholden to the same privileged and elite class, but there are traditional differences that make an impact on the margins. Clinton and Gore, for all their talk, didn't significantly advance environmental issues in eight years—not until the end, when Clinton started signing all these executive orders to embarrass the next Republican president. But you have to gauge a president on the ultimate consequences of his policy on American life. Clinton did face the deficit, he did do the right thing on the economy, he did raise taxes on the wealthy to deal with deficits, he did finally go into Bosnia.

Q: Looking ahead at the political calendar, it strikes me that the presidential primary process, which has always been pretty weird, gets worse every four years. Once upon a time, the primary season went from February well into May or June of an election year, and you got that sense of campaign-trail drama, where the candidates were tested in the public eye. Now they spend a year or more raising money, and the primary season has been packed into a ridiculous blitzkrieg of six or eight weeks. By the end of March next year, if not earlier, we'll know who the Democratic nominee is. And it's probably going to be the guy with the most money. Doesn't that sound like a democracy in danger?

I think democracy is in danger. I think democracy is gasping at the moment. The money people primarily determine who runs and wins in both parties. George W. Bush simply outspent John McCain in 2000; when Bush was in trouble in South Carolina, he was able to pour money in. Increasingly a small number of people determine who runs and therefore who wins. The participatory process is in paralysis. The mainstream press is largely owned by a handful of major corporations, so the debate is only on the periphery. It's on the Internet or out in the streets.

I do believe that the oxygen is going out of democracy. Slowly, but at an accelerating pace, the democratic institutions of this country are being bought off or traded off or allowed to atrophy. Political participation is one of them. There simply isn't any way for political candidates to engage in a true debate that people can watch and respond to. We don't hear many ideas anymore, just sound bites. Democracy is in great difficulty right now, and this troubles me about our country.