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Bill Moyers

The seventy-year-old journalist—whose new collection of speeches and essays arrives in bookstores this month—on why he's parting ways with PBS, what it was like to work for LBJ, and whether objectivity is all it's cracked up to be.

Interview by Evan Smith

Q: Why, at this time in your life, have you decided to call it quits at PBS?

I sensed the light at the end of the tunnel. I've been producing television for 32 years. I started in the fall of '71, and while I feel in one sense that I'm at the top of my form, I also feel an unsatisfied hunger to do some things I have not done before. I want to seriously approach a book on the Johnson years, and I have some other writing that I would like to do. Mostly I want to remove myself from the implacable deadlines of the broadcast and its many moving parts, which leave me no time to do things outside that center of gravity. I presumed to do this a few years ago. At the time, the powers at PBS came to me and said, "We need to start a new program. You and Judith [his wife and longtime collaborator] are essential elements; if you're involved, we can get this started without the usual jealousies and political battles." That program turned out to be *Now*. It was going to be just one year. One year became two. Two became three.

Q: Three could easily become five or ten.

Three could. It's an important show within the realm of niche broadcasting—it has a following. The people who don't like it really don't like it, and they keep telling us so, and the people who do like it love it, and they tell us so. There's no right way to end a marathon, which is what my career in broadcasting has been. I just thought the time was now—no pun intended.

Q: It's really about you—it's not about some dissatisfaction with the state of public broadcasting.

Oh, no. A few weeks ago I ended the broadcast with an essay explaining why I was leaving. I had interviewed Maurice Sendak, who doesn't want to write anymore, doesn't want to draw anymore. So I asked him, "What do you want to do?" And he quoted Keats on the taste of a peach in your mouth and how he just wants to relish it. I'd been thinking about this, so after I finished editing Sendak's interview, I took out my yellow pad and wrote a swan song. Nothing is pushing me, but something is pulling me. I have to stop doing what I'm doing in order to know what it is.

Q: So you plan to stay, from a distance, in the PBS family.

I intend to become much more of an advocate for public broadcasting than when I am on the air and seem to be acting in self-interest. As a private citizen, I'll be one of its most consistent and ardent supporters. We must get a $5 billion trust fund. We must sever our ties to federal funding. We pay a price when we're even slightly tethered to the taxpayers, to the Congress, to the political process.

Q: What price?

For years we've been looking over our shoulders, worried that a chairman of an appropriations committee is going to get angry over some piece of programming. Self-censorship comes unintentionally and even unknowingly to the person who is aware that he is obligated to the government, but this is one of those times when journalism needs to get as close to the verifiable truth as possible. And when I do that, there's always a rumble. Every three or four years, critics of public broadcasting use my programming as the means to go after its funding.

Q: Do you subscribe to the popular view that all commercial news gatherers, whether on the big networks or the 24-hour cable channels, aren't as good as they should be?

There has never been a golden era of broadcasting. I have been in and around broadcasting for four decades, in and out of Washington. You always had to pick and choose, but you could find very good programming, public affairs programming in particular. One can still do that. *60 Minutes* in the past few years has recovered its fighting spirit; they've been doing one good piece after another. When Dan Rather spent a week in Iraq recently, he did some great reporting. There's Tim Russert, on *Meet the Press*, though that's very much inside the Beltway. So there are islands—small islands.

Q: Is the problem that the networks are driven by commercial imperatives, or is it that there aren't good journalists out there?

There are plenty of good journalists: Anderson Cooper and Wolf Blitzer, at CNN. A lot of those correspondents at CBS. Tom Brokaw is a good journalist. But there aren't plenty of opportunities to be a good journalist. Look what's happened to the morning news shows. Look what's happened to the newsmagazines—they're all designed to get people to cry about lost children. The tragedy is that young people come in here and talk to me about how they want to be in broadcasting, but they don't know where to go or whether they will ever have a chance to do serious work.

Q: How much of that has to do with the climate of hostility toward the media, beginning with the government's dim view of what we do?

John Dean said on my show that the secrecy today is worse than Watergate. It is certainly worse than anything I've seen in my lifetime.

Q: And you've been inside the bubble.

You know, I was the president's press secretary at a time when it could have been worse than it is today. But there was a curious paradox about Lyndon Johnson. He hated the press—tipping our hands, getting ahead of us, reporting on who was going to be an ambassador before he was ready to announce it. He hated losing his options to the media. But at the same time, he spent more time with journalists than any president I've known. During Vietnam, he raved at Peter Arnett when Arnett was reporting from the ground. He raved at David Halberstam's reporting. But he'd say, "Get Halberstam in here. Get Arnett in here." He refused to censor what was happening in Vietnam. He would quarrel with the press, engage in hand-to-hand combat with them. He wanted the press to be stenographers for the official view of reality. But he didn't hide from the press, and he wouldn't let us hide from the press.

War is always a great reinforcer of secrecy, but a war on terror is the most insidious threat to openness—you can always claim, without having to explain why, that something can't be done, something can't be public, something can't be told. It is harder and harder today to find out what's going on.

Q: Having worked inside the White House yourself, understanding in a way that few people can the pressures and challenges your successors face today, can you have no sympathy for their point of view?

I understand the political impulse to protect your strategy—you don't win a football game if you hand the opposing coach your game plan. I also understand the incredible resistance you meet when you try to tell the truth and nobody believes you. That's a consequence of the long years, from Vietnam forward, of diminished credibility on the part of the government.

And I understand that you have to keep control of your timing. When Lyndon Johnson was going to have his gallbladder operation, I was going to announce it. I literally had to lock Merriman Smith, of UPI, in my office. He came into my office at about five minutes until three and said, “My wife knows a nurse out at the Bethesda Naval Hospital, and she says they’re making preparations out there for a presidential visit. Can you tell me what’s going on?” I said, “Give me a few minutes.” And he said, “No, I’m going to walk out of here and report this story. You can confirm it or deny it, or you can explain it.” I’d been told once to take up cigar smoking, because in the thirty seconds it takes to light a cigar, I could compose my strategy. So I got my cigar lit, and I got his lit, and then I walked over to the door and locked it. I took the key and came back to my desk. The minute I knew that the markets had closed on Wall Street, I said, “I can talk to you now.” We didn’t want a bulletin going out that Johnson was going to the hospital five minutes before the markets closed.

But I also remember once calling the Pentagon’s office of public affairs and asking them to send me the clippings on Vietnam from around the country. They came over in a large box covered in tape and marked “Top Secret.” These were clippings from newspapers! That’s what happens when you’re prone to keep a secret.

Q: How valid is the criticism that the media are biased?

Since the eighties, when Ronald Reagan vetoed the continuation of the fairness doctrine, we’ve seen the rise of an ideological press. A study we cited on the air last fall of the 45 top-rated radio stations in the country found that there were 310 hours of right-wing talk and 5 hours of non-right-wing talk. If there isn’t a vast right-wing conspiracy, then there’s a vast right-wing echo chamber, and you can track it from the Republican National Committee through Rush Limbaugh and on to the talk-radio wannabes around the country, then right up to Sean Hannity in the afternoon and Bill O’Reilly in the evening and on into the night with Michael Savage. It’s designed to attack anybody who challenges the right-wing mentality. That’s why they come after me or Rather or anybody who dares to tell the opposing view of reality.

Q: And now we have Al Franken and the liberal folks at the Air America network trying to go toe-to-toe with Limbaugh. Is that the answer?

Journalism shouldn’t imitate the propaganda of the right. That’s not what journalism is about. If you program for an audience that is not served by ideology, if you just cover the news that needs to be covered and tell the stories of what’s happening, you’ll have a larger audience, because this country is largely nonideological. I’m glad as a citizen that there’s an alternative to the right-wingers, but I’d hate to see journalism stuck in that us-versus-them mentality. And I’d hate to see Franken and that crowd become as irresponsible as the right is.

Q: Let’s talk about the president. Do you feel, as a Texan, that you understand him any better than the rest of the country does?

Well, I have particular insights for several reasons. I know how Texas works. I understand the good ol’ boys’ game. Texas has always been a plantation for the powerful or the wealthy or the corporate interests, from ranchers to oil barons and chemical companies. Lyndon Johnson rose on their shoulders, and as he rose on their shoulders, he lifted them up too. I understand how Texas politics has always been: You do well by doing good. Bush comes out of that Texas mentality that says, “What’s yours is mine, and what’s mine I’ll compound the interest on.” He represents the power structure of Texas. Governors and politicians have always done it. John Connally did it too. It goes back a long time.

I also think I understand President Bush because I understand recovering alcoholics and drug addicts. I did a series called *Close to Home* because my son, at age thirty, crashed. It turned out he had been using drugs heavily since he was about fifteen. Judith and I didn’t know, and that shows you how naive and blind parents can be. He’s had three relapses, but he’s done very well. So I understand what happens to a human being in midlife who crashes from the use of drugs. In their reaction to alcoholism, I see a lot of George W. Bush in my son and vice versa. In this way I also understand him from a religious standpoint. He's a Methodist; I'm a Baptist. I understand how you carry into your public life your own private matters. I do. I understand him, I think, as a man who brings piety into politics, as someone under the grip of substance abuse. He's constantly fighting it, trying to overcome it, resisting it, and I admire him for that.

The thing that troubles me most is that he seems to have lived in a cocoon, locked up like that boy in the bubble in Houston many years ago. He does not seem to me to understand the implications of leading a polarized nation.

Q: If the president himself were here, or if his aides were here, they would say, "Moyers is a journalist. Moyers shouldn't have a public point of view about this. Moyers's job is to be objective."

I once thought that. But as experience has taught me, objectivity can sometimes be a blinder. Objective means not being seduced by the good intentions of public men. Objectivity means being true to your own reading of the record and your own analytical processes of reasoning and conclusion and logic. It's a journalist's job to tell the viewers or the readers what he has come to think about what they see as only data or information. There's a truth behind the news that is the journalist's obligation to discover as fairly and responsibly as possible. I can't refuse to share it because I'm afraid that I'm going to be accused of being unobjective.

Q: With that assessment of Bush in mind, let's go back and talk about LBJ. In reading your new book, Moyers on America*, I was reminded of your ambivalence toward him. At one point you say, "I don't harbor any idealized notion of politics and democracy; after all, I worked for Lyndon Johnson." I wonder if your own personal history of the man has evolved over time—if you feel about him today as you did back then.*

I didn't really know Lyndon Johnson. I served with him for only four years, and I couldn't see him in all his other relationships. The president was many characters: He was one thing with [Secretary of the Treasury] Douglas Dillon and another with Lady Bird. But as I also say in the book, he was one of the most interesting and complex men I have ever met, and I have a deep sense of obligation to him. He trusted me. If it hadn't been for Lyndon Johnson, I probably would have had a good life editing the *Marshall News Messenger*, which was one of my ambitions.

But I've had a good life in a different way. He taught me so much about politics and about what's possible, about human behavior, about the consequences of decisions. At the same time, he was a driven man, a man who could consume you. Part of my struggle with him was to serve him but not be consumed by him. People used to say it was like a father-son relationship. I don't think it was that. I think it was a relationship of a combat veteran and a new recruit. You learn to loathe the sergeant who tries to mold you because he knows something you don't know—that one day, you're going to be shot at. But later on you realize what he was trying to tell you. For all of Johnson's overreaching, hyperbolic scheming, I shared some moments with him—tender moments, moments of empathy and imagination—when I almost wept at his desire to make a difference to people whose lives would be worse without him.

Q: Do you think the public's view, after all the histories of Johnson that have been written, squares with yours?

I think it's coming around. This was a man who was a president at the wrong time. He was a consensus builder when the country was coming apart. He was rooted in the Depression in an era of growing prosperity. He had to be a cold war president, but he wasn't really born to be that. It was a black-and-white world, and nothing was ever really black and white to Johnson. No master parliamentarian could use the words "black and white." You've got to deal with sons of bitches and at the same time you've got to deal with people who think of themselves as saints. He had a passion for compromise, but that was not what it took to win the cold war. Ronald Reagan proved that you have to get your gun and blaze away. And that wasn't Johnson.

I cannot tell you how many people have talked to me about hearing the [LBJ] tapes on C-SPAN. They show the Johnson that I remember, in all of his raw and ribald reveries with [Senator Richard] Russell, in his wily seduction of a House member, in his efforts to intimidate the press or inflate the importance of a journalist sitting across from him. He was a master impresario of human emotion and need and greed. He knew everybody's price, and watching him try to negotiate it was like watching a great art connoisseur go through a museum .