

Republican assault on public broadcasting targeted liberal commentator Bill Moyers

David Walsh
6 June 2005

Right-wing forces in the government-appointed Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), including its chairman, Kenneth Tomlinson, are waging a campaign to silence political opposition and whatever remains of investigative journalism in public television and radio. In these efforts, the Republican Party thought police encounter no serious resistance from the Democrats or the media establishment.

One of the principal targets of the ultra-right's ire has been the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) news program "Now," formerly with Bill Moyers. (He retired last year and was replaced by David Brancaccio.)

Moyers, a policy assistant to Lyndon Johnson and press secretary (1965-1967) during the escalation of the US military intervention in Vietnam, is hardly a radical. Nonetheless, the Texas-raised journalist (born 1934) evoked the ire of the extreme right by airing exposures of the chemical industry's poisoning of workers, Pentagon spending boondoggles, aspects of the Bush administration's assault on democratic rights after September 11, corporate influence in Washington, and the like.

After Republicans gained control of the US Senate in the 2002 elections, Moyers pointed out, for example, the elementary fact that the entire federal government was now "united behind a right-wing agenda" that included "the power of the state to force pregnant women to give up control over their lives."

Such comments enraged right-wing Republicans, including Tomlinson, a former director of the Voice of America in the Reagan administration and editor-in-chief of *Reader's Digest*. Tomlinson was appointed to the CPB by Bill Clinton and elected chair of its board in September 2003.

A recent comment by Donald Lambro, chief political correspondent for the Rev. Moon's *Washington Times*, sums up the views of the Republican right: "Mr. Moyers' 'Now' was a particularly outrageous example of a program that let a journalist attack the Bush administration and other favorite liberal targets, while hosting a rarely interrupted series of liberal rants by guests about 'corporate greed,' environmental pollution and a government that does not spend enough on the poor."

Tomlinson, according to Moyers, "waged a surreptitious and relentless campaign against 'Now' and me" (*New York Times*, May 2, 2005). Christy Carpenter, a CPB board member from 1998 to 2002, told the *Times* that one of the disturbing developments of Tomlinson's chairmanship was a "very vehement dislike for Bill Moyers."

In a May 15 speech to the National Conference for Media Reform in St. Louis, Moyers warned of the profoundly anti-democratic implications of the suppression of political dissent and critical reporting in the media. He observed that Washington journalistic rules

"divide the world into Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, and allow journalists to pretend they have done their job if, instead of reporting the truth behind the news, they merely give each side an opportunity to spin the news."

Moyers told his listeners that the "right-wing media and their allies" at the CPB were attempting to "threaten and intimidate" journalists who told the truth. He remarked, "An unconscious people, an indoctrinated people, a people fed only on partisan information and opinion that confirm their own bias, a people made morbidly obese in mind and spirit by the junk food of propaganda, is less inclined to put up a fight, to ask questions and be skeptical. That kind of orthodoxy can kill a democracy—or worse."

The former White House press secretary noted that Richard Nixon and his administration, including the president's "sidekick" Pat Buchanan, had launched an attack on the CPB more than 30 years ago. An internal memo recorded Nixon's determination to "get the left-wing commentators who are cutting us up off public television at once—indeed, yesterday if possible."

However, Moyers pointed out, "in those days...there were still Republicans in America who did not march in ideological lockstep and who stood on principle against politicizing public television." A leading public television official in Dallas, a Republican, led a nationwide effort to stop Nixon's intimidation.

The CPB chairman at the time, Moyers continued, "was former Republican Congressman Thomas Curtis, who was also a principled man. He resigned, claiming White House interference. Within a few months, the crisis was over. CPB maintained its independence, PBS grew in strength, and Richard Nixon would soon face impeachment and resign for violating the public trust, not just public broadcasting."

No leading figure in the Democratic Party, much less the Republican, would dare stand up to the extremist onslaught against Moyers and the CPB today, so far has official American political life swung to the right.

Democratic congressmen John Dingell of Michigan and David Obey of Wisconsin have asked the CPB's inspector general to look into this clear-cut case of "political interference into public broadcasting." Aside from the investigation urged by Dingell and Obey, which is little more than an obligatory gesture, no effort has been made by the Democrats to expose the character and breadth of the attacks on the CPB. As always, the ground is thoroughly ceded to the extreme right without a fight. This hardly comes out of the blue. The attacks on PBS, along with National Endowment for the Arts and other such institutions, began in earnest in the late 1980s. Officials of these organizations, along with their supposed defenders in the liberal establishment, have retreated continually.

Journalist Rory O'Connor notes on Alternet.org that "Along with Bill Moyers, David Fanning and 'Frontline,' my partner Danny Schechter and I were high on the original hit list. Our thought-crime? Producing the anti-apartheid newsmagazine program 'South Africa Now,' which appeared weekly between 1988-1991 on more than 150 public television stations." The program came under fire from the extreme right, which "labeled us 'hard-line Marxist propagandists' and 'advocates, not journalists,' " and "few within the public television hierarchy said a word."

Pat Mitchell, president and chief executive of PBS, capitulated earlier this year in the most shameless fashion when Bush administration officials attacked "Postcards From Buster," a children's program, because it supposedly "legitimized the homosexual lifestyle" by acknowledging that same-sex couples existed in the US.

The record of efforts to intimidate Moyers and other liberal commentators is clear. In December 2003, Tomlinson sent a letter to Mitchell alleging that " 'Now With Bill Moyers' does not contain anything approaching the balance the law requires for public broadcasting."

Soon thereafter, Tomlinson paid a consultant \$10,000 to monitor Moyers' program for three months. Writes the *Times*, "The reports Mr. Tomlinson saw placed the program's guests in categories like 'anti-Bush,' 'anti-business' and 'anti-Tom DeLay,' referring to the House majority leader, corporation officials said. The reports found the guests were overwhelmingly anti-Bush, a conclusion Mr. Moyers disputed."

In an op-ed piece published May 10 in the *Washington Times*, Tomlinson wrote, "To me and many other supporters of public broadcasting the image of the left-wing bias of 'Now'—unchallenged by a balancing point of view on public broadcasting's Friday evening lineup—was unhealthy. Indeed, it jeopardized essential support for public TV."

In other actions, the CPB recently hired two "ombudsmen" for the first time in its history to review PBS news and public affairs programs for evidence of "bias"—without bothering to notify Mitchell. The two ombudsmen are right-winger William Schulz, a colleague of Tomlinson's at *Reader's Digest* for decades, and Ken Bode, a former NBC and CNN reporter, who most recently worked as a columnist for the *Indianapolis Star*. Bode, the supposedly "liberal" member of the watch-dog pair, once explained that his worst day as a journalist was the day Ronald Reagan was shot. "As someone said at the time, he went into the hospital as Ronald Reagan; he came out as John Wayne," commented Bode.

The individual charged with setting up the office of the ombudsmen, Mary Catherine Andrews, was still working as the director of the White House's Office of Global Communications when she "helped draft the office's guiding principles, set up a Web page and prepared a news release about the appointment of the new ombudsmen," according to the *Times*.

CPB officials, also for the first time, insisted on linking \$26.5 million in federal funds to an agreement that would commit PBS to strict "objectivity and balance" in each of its programs. The PBS general counsel advised that this amounted to "government encroachment on and supervision of program content, potentially in violation of the First Amendment."

In addition, Tomlinson lined up \$5 million in corporate financing to air "The Journal Editorial Report," a weekly talk show hosted by the *Wall Street Journal*'s Paul Gigot, editor of the *Journal*'s editorial

page.

Ken Ferree, a Republican operative and former Federal Communications Commission media bureau chief under Michael Powell, was recently named as interim CPB chief executive. Tomlinson has made it known that his permanent choice for the post is Patricia Harrison, the current assistant secretary of state and former co-chairwoman of the Republican National Committee.

At a gathering of the Association of Public Television Stations in Baltimore last November, Tomlinson told the group that it should make sure its programming better reflects the "Republican mandate." He later claimed this was only a joke.

Two "National Public Opinion" surveys commissioned by the CPB, but whose results have been buried by Tomlinson, indicate that the overwhelming majority of the US public is satisfied with PBS programming and that the "majority of the US adult population does not believe that the news and information programming on public broadcasting is biased. The plurality of Americans indicate that there is no apparent bias one way or the other, while approximately one-in-five detect a liberal bias and approximately one-in-ten detect a conservative bias." Public broadcasting had an 80 percent "favorable" rating and "more than half of those surveyed believed that PBS news and information programming was more 'trustworthy' than news shows on the commercial networks" (Center for Digital Democracy).

The notion of a liberal "bias" in the mass media is a favorite theme of the ultra-right. By any objective standard, this is a laughable claim. The American media, with the exception of PBS, is owned outright by a handful of corporate conglomerates. Its leading figures are multimillionaires who unfailingly defend the interests of big business.

The ability of the Bush administration to launch an illegal war in Iraq on the basis of lies is a testament to the failure of the American media to perform any of its supposed functions in a democratic society. The range of political views offered in the American media, including PBS and NPR, runs the gamut, to paraphrase Dorothy Parker, "from A to B." The same small crowd of establishment "talking heads" makes the rounds of the television news and interview programs, offering apologetics in one fashion or another for the policies carried out in the interests of America's ruling elite.

No voice is given in the American mass media to serious opposition. Socialist and left-wing voices are systematically excluded from the airwaves, private or public. No genuine reflection of popular sentiment is even permitted to make its presence felt. According to recent opinion polls, only 40 percent of the population supports Bush's Iraq war policy. But the opinions and feelings of the remaining 60 percent (or 50 percent, or 70 percent, or whatever the percentage might be) find virtually no reflection in television and radio broadcasts.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact