

US: Public television airs discussion on presidential impeachment

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The Bill Moyers Journal, an evening talk show on the PBS television network, devoted an hour-long discussion program last week to the topic of presidential impeachment.

The program, hosted by former Johnson administration aide Moyers, saw guests John Nichols, a writer for the *Nation* magazine, and Bruce Fein, a constitutional lawyer with Republican connections, call for the impeachment of President Bush and Vice President Cheney.

The fact that such a discussion was organized on American public television, even if on a relatively obscure program, is an indication of the depth of the Bush administration's crisis. The discussion, however, was largely superficial and detached from political realities. Neither the guests nor the host proved capable of providing an analysis of *why* the Bush administration is allowed to run criminally rampant, nor could they put forward a realistic program for bringing the White House to account for its crimes.

The differences that emerged in the discussion were not so much over whether the White House has committed impeachable offenses—all three took this for granted—but rather over why Congress continues to take no action to rein in abuses by the Executive Branch.

Bruce Fein based his argument for impeachment on strict constitutional grounds and ascribed Congress's refusal to press for impeachment to a "lack of statesmanship" on Capitol Hill. Fein served in the Justice Department during the Reagan administration and as General Counsel of the Federal Communications Commission. He also wrote the first article of impeachment against President Clinton. He is now affiliated with a number of right-wing think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation.

On the other side of the table, John Nichols, a Washington correspondent for the *Nation* and an associate editor of the *Capitol Times*, went out of his way to explain the Democrats' refusal to mount an offensive against the White House. He put forward a grab-bag of excuses including, but not limited to the media's servility, Bush's refusal to work with Congress, and the claim that the Democrats did not

"quite know how to handle the moment" after the September 2001 terrorist attacks. All of this was supposed to excuse the Democrats' consistent collaboration in Bush's major crimes.

In his comments, Fein noted, "Congress is giving up powers voluntarily—there's nothing right now that would prevent Congress from the immediate shutting down all of George Bush's and Dick Cheney's illegal programs. Simply saying there's no money to collect foreign intelligence ... the power of the purse. That is an absolute power. And yet Congress shies from it."

Moyers replied, "Well, what you just said indicts the Congress more than you're indicting George Bush and Dick Cheney."

Nichols intervened immediately to shift the blame. "Let me mention the unspoken branch of government, which is the fourth estate: the media," he said. "Now, just imagine if the—if the members of the White House Press Corps on a regular basis were saying to Tony Snow, 'But hasn't what the President's done here violated the Constitution?' The whole national dialogue would shift. And Congress itself would suddenly become a better player."

In other words, if only the press were to indict Bush, the Democrats in Congress would find the courage to oppose the White House. It is a testament to the servility that characterizes Nichols' perspective and the political-social milieu which he represents that Fein, a Republican and participant in the right-wing conspiracy to remove Clinton, was able to argue on a more principled basis for the removal of Bush.

Such back-bending is a natural outcome of the political outlook shared by Nichols and his colleagues at the *Nation*. They work to stifle opposition to the two-party system and contain mass popular resentment within the confines of the Democratic Party. Nichols does not hesitate to criticize policies adopted by the Democrats, but only in order to better promote illusions in the possibility of pressuring the party to oppose the war and stand up to the Bush administration. Such a perspective causes Nichols to contort

into a number of strange positions, as seen in the following exchange:

John Nichols: “Well, the interesting thing is we are well down the track in the organic process [of impeachment]. The people are saying it’s time. We need some accountability.”

Bill Moyers: “But Nancy Pelosi doesn’t agree.”

John Nichols: “Nancy Pelosi is wrong. Nancy Pelosi is disregarding her oath of office. She should change course now. And more importantly, members of her caucus and responsible Republicans should step up.”

Impeachment itself is the constitutionally designated action to be taken against those who “disregard their oath of office.” If Nichols’ statement is to be taken seriously, it is a case of criminals refusing to prosecute criminals. But in any case, not impeaching Bush, the most impeachable president in American history, is hardly the only crime of which Pelosi and company stand guilty.

It should be noted that the war in Iraq was barely mentioned during the program. Before this, the greatest of the Bush administration’s crimes, its other abuses pale by comparison. But the White House’s lies leading up to the war were skimmed over. Again, there is a reason for this. If starting an illegal war is an impeachable offense, why should only the President and Vice President be punished? Why not every member of Congress who voted for this criminal action? For better or worse, such proceedings would implicate the members of the House and the Senate who passed for the Iraq War Resolution in 2002—including the majority of Democratic Senators—as well as the overwhelming majority of Democrats in both houses who have repeatedly voted to fund the war since.

Nichols, however, made it clear that he is intent on averting any such far-reaching political settling of accounts. He insisted that he has no desire to “take an axe to the government.”

The *Nation* columnist continued, “You are seeing impeachment as a constitutional crisis. Impeachment is the cure for a constitutional crisis. Don’t mistake the medicine for the disease. When you have a constitutional crisis, the founders are very clear. They said there is a way to deal with this. We don’t have to have a war. We don’t have to raise an army and go to Washington. We have procedures in place where we can sanction a president appropriately, do what needs to be done up to the point of removing him from office and continue the republic. So we’re not talking here about taking an ax to government. Quite the opposite. We are talking about applying some necessary strong medicine.”

In one sense, Nichols presents impeachment as a great panacea, capable of easily reverting fair to fair and foul to foul. But things are by no means so simple. The people in whose power impeachment rests—the Democrats and

Republicans in Congress—are the very same ones who approved the Bush administration’s worst crimes, including the Iraq war, the USA Patriot act, and illegal domestic spying. For Congress to impeach the Bush and Cheney would trigger a major political crisis, the avoidance of which has been the overriding goal of the Democrats during the whole of Bush’s tenure in office.

There is, however, another side to Nichols’ argument: under conditions of an explosive growth in popular resentment, impeachment may become necessary as a pressure valve, aimed at preventing the further escalation of mass political opposition to the war, the attacks on democratic rights and the entire two-party system that bears responsibility for them.

According to a poll conducted earlier this month by the American Research Group, a majority of American voters—including nearly 70 percent of Democratic voters—now favor beginning impeachment procedures, But Pelosi, the Democratic Speaker of the House, sticks by her position that “impeachment is off the table.”

Later in the discussion, Bill Moyers asked his guests rhetorically, “Is there a Tom DeLay in the Congress today making it his or her mission to impeach Bush and Cheney?”

Obviously the answer is no. The reason for this lies in the character of the Democratic Party itself. While both major parties represent the interests of the financial elite and agree on the overall strategic goals of furthering US imperialist interests, the Democrats have the burden of masquerading as the party of reform, opposition to war, and defense of the “middle class.”

The party’s essential role as a political instrument of the American ruling class is starkly at odds with its fading populist pretensions. In all cases, the interests of the most predatory sections of the ruling class carry the day. This is why the Democratic Party wavers on all issues where it is not united with the Republicans, and the reason why it has thus far done everything possible to avoid impeaching Bush.



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