



# BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

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**Sissela Bok**

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## Sissela Bok

**BILL MOYERS:** *(on camera)* Good evening. I'm Bill Moyers. Americans never know

nowadays when they'll wake-up to yet one more disclosure of deception in government, from the U2 affair to the war in Vietnam, from Watergate to Iran-contra, and in a steady stream of daily information and disinformation, the bond of trust between the government and the governed seems frayed to the breaking point. Can a republic die of too many lies? The question has become critical for the future of the democracy. In this broadcast you'll meet a woman whose work is devoted to trust in America. Join me as we meet Sissela Bok.

*(voice-over)* As a philosopher, Sissela Bok grapples with hard truths, and with hard untruths, as well. Her writings explore the psychology of lying, the consequences of deception, and the perils of keeping secrets. Intellectual accomplishment is a tradition for her family. Eight years after her father, the Swedish scholar, Gunnar Myrdal, won a Nobel Prize for economics, her mother, Alma, an activist and diplomat, won the Nobel Peace Prize. Sissela Bok studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, and went on to earn advanced degrees in both psychology and philosophy. She has taught ethics at Harvard Medical School and its Kennedy School of Government, and now she teaches philosophy at Brandeis University. Her new book, *A Strategy For Peace*, will be out early next year. At her home near Boston, we talked about breaking and keeping the public trust.

*(Interviewing)* What do you find so fascinating about the subject of lying and secrecy? They seem so, sort of, forbidden topics in a way, or topics not all that pleasing or affirmative about life. What about this subject interests you?

**SISSELA BOK:** Well, the subject of lying connects for me, very much, with all of communication, and the amazing thing that we human beings do communicate, in fact, with one another rather well, quite often. But then lying, of course, is a way of gaining power over other people through manipulating them in various ways, and this is something that children learn. They also learn to keep secrets. And then I believe we almost have to unlearn that. If we are to mature, we have to unlearn any enjoyment of that power.

**MOYERS:** Any enjoyment of deception.

**BOK:** Yes, any benefit from it.

**MOYERS:** The power that deception brings to you over someone else, you have to unlearn that? Why?

**BOK:** You have to know that the power is there, and then I think you have to see if you can possibly live without it. You know, live without doing that. That doesn't mean you never get into a situation where lying might be necessary, but on the whole, how can you try to lead your life so that you communicate with other people without trying to manipulate them?

**MOYERS:** I remember when I was White House Press Secretary, the line of George Bernard Shaw, who said, "I am not a professional liar, and I'm surprised at the extent to which, in my infirmity, I'm an amateur one." And I kept being surprised at the extent to which I could be an amateur liar.

**BOK:** Yes, because it can happen so easily. And, of course, sometimes people just slip into it, they don't even stop to think.

**MOYERS:** There is this general lament in the country that we're slipping, that our ethics are going downhill, that this generation isn't as good as the previous generation, that moral standards are deteriorating. Well, you say it yourself in your book, you quote somebody else saying that civilization is on the decline. What's your own appraisal of that?

**BOK:** I think, first of all, that that's something people have always said since the beginning of time, and it seems that it happens particularly when they reach middle age. All of a sudden—**MOYERS:** You're getting very personal now!

**BOK:**—they begin to think that when they were young, or when they were children, everything was much better or maybe they even look back 100 years or 200 years and say, "When our country was that much younger, everything was so much better." But then when you ask them, "Where was this Golden Age? Was it, for instance, in this country during our period of slavery, was that so great? Was it so wonderful for women? Who, exactly, was benefiting from these

high moral standards?" Then they become more hesitant. So that I don't think, in fact, that we can show that as a general rule everything is slipping.

**MOYERS:** Someone said to me recently that he thought American life, all of American life, was built upon deception. Do you think that's a fair assessment?

**BOK:** No, I don't think so. You know, if that were true, then I don't think our society could function at all, and after all, it does function reasonably well much of the time. I don't think that human relationships could function if everything were deceptive. Advertising very often, in fact, is not. You know, there's lots of factual, informative advertising. Then in politics, and in business I think that there are quite a few quite honorable, upright individuals around; and the sad thing is that whenever somebody comes into the news who has, you know, done a lot of deceiving, then it casts aspersions on all the others.

**MOYERS:** And Oliver North, then, is treated as the public face of everybody in the bureaucracy, of everyone in the White House.

**BOK:** You hear that quite a lot in the people who tell you why they're not going to vote, or say so in television interviews and at other times. They simply have no confidence any more in public officials, you know, which I regard as terribly wrong-headed. Because I would say that most public officials are trustworthy, a lot of the people who work in the various bureaucracies. But when somebody comes to public light who is not, then, first of all that sets an example, and somebody said, you know, examples of this kind are very contagious. And I think that's true.

**MOYERS:** What's happening in our government that has given us the deception of Watergate, the deception of the Iran-contra scandal, the previous deceptions on Vietnam?

**BOK:** There is, to some extent, a desire on the part of every government, I believe, to have greater control over secrecy. Many members of government feel that that's the way that they can get more things done. If only they didn't have to worry what was lawful, if only they didn't have to worry about elected representatives of the people, they could get a lot of things done that somehow many people are trying to prevent at present. On the other hand, we do have the countervailing influence. It's getting harder and harder to keep these secrets for very long. You can keep the secret long enough to do a terrible amount of harm to your nation, but, in the long run, they will surface. Not only in this country, but in lots of other countries, it has happened that the Iran-Iraq war has involved a number of governments in arms trades and other activities that were secret and that have come to light. And so I do believe that, what with the whole world press, and the kind of information that now travels across all boundaries, it's going to be harder to keep that kind of secret for very long.

**MOYERS:** And yet, it has not escaped me as a journalist that it was not the American press that broke the story of Iran-contra; that it was a small, obscure magazine in Beirut, Lebanon, that broke the story. I'm not sure we're as vigilant as the circumstances—I know we're not as vigilant as the circumstances require.

**BOK:** I think, perhaps — and there I should ask you — but it seems also that sometimes members of the press are no longer doing the kind of digging that would be necessary to find out the information. If they simply wait for press releases, it's not clear that they're always going to get what they want.

**MOYERS:** What did it say to you that an admitted liar, a man who admitted deceiving Congress, lying to the press, lying to the public, Oliver North, became a hero to many people, including a national hero to his own President?

**BOK:** I was thinking about that quite a lot, because I asked myself, "How come that people seem to be identifying with him, not with the people who are being deceived?" Now, usually when we get worried about a lie, we worry because we think, "How would it feel for me," to be, for instance, in the situation of the patient who has been deceived by cancer, or a spouse who has been deceived by infidelity or something, how come then that everybody identified with him? And I thought that there were enough people in America who didn't care if he lied to fore-igners, in particular not to the Iranians. There were also enough people in America who didn't care if he lied to members of Congress because those groups had been on the receiving end of a lot of criticism, you know, in these last few years. So, the curious thing, then, was that so many people identified with the person who was telling the lies. And that meant that they were not asking the question about, you know, what happens to the people being lied to? What happens to the country? What happens if more lies are told, perhaps to us next time? They simply didn't

stop to ask those questions.

**MOYERS:** It's been quite intriguing to me that Colonel North is out making speeches and raising money as a hero to right wing groups. They still look upon him as a true patriot, irrespective of the deceptions, the lies, the cover-up.

**BOK:** To some extent they're not entering into debate, you know, with other people about what patriotism really means. You know, what does it mean to love your country, and to honor your country. Does it mean that you lie on behalf of your country sometimes? Does it mean that you draw your government into these kinds of problems? Can it mean that?

**MOYERS:** They say it does, because we live in a lawless world, and it's naive to expect the United States government to act lawfully in a world that doesn't respect the rule of law.

**BOK:** It's true. There are parts of the world that are quite lawless. There are also, in fact, quite a few parts of the world that are not. The question is, "How do we expand the number of nations and societies that do respect the law?" We don't necessarily want to say that just because some don't, we're going to classify our government in that group.

**MOYERS:** Because we are working toward, we hope, a lawful world, not a lawless one.

**BOK:** Yes, very much. And then the question has to come up, "What are we doing? What am I doing as an individual? What is somebody doing as a public official? What is an entire government doing to make sure that it moves in that direction, to make the world a little more law abiding rather than less?" It's so important for us to be able to shift perspective and to say, "Okay, here I'm on the side of the people who are telling the lies, and I think it's alright for the moment because it's my side, but how would I feel if I were on that other side?" And then to say, "Well, next time I may be on the other side. In fact, these very same people who say they're my friends now, may need, for their particular purposes, to lie to me next time. And then I'll feel very much more troubled than I did when they lied to some foreigners that I didn't care about."

**MOYERS:** In your book on secrets, your point that partisanship causes people to condone abuses for their particular cause, their particular ideal, that they would never condone in their adversary. And it's partisanship — that parochial loyalty to a cause, an idea, a crusade, a campaign — that is the ultimate corrupter of one's own judgment and one's own standards.

**BOK:** When it goes too far it does that corrupting. I would say that any community needs, of course, the cohesiveness of some loyalty, you know, any community needs that, but when the partisanship becomes what I sometimes call pathological, when it goes so far as to say that in order to preserve loyalty within our small group, we can do anything to those other people — we can send terrorists into their country, we can spew forth disinformation, we can do anything — then it has become pathological. And then people don't, again, stop at all to ask any questions. They simply have blinded themselves to the kind of harm they're doing to the outside.

**MOYERS:** Well, I saw this, of course, in the Johnson era when Democrats who had doubts about the Vietnam war nonetheless supported the President because he was their partisan. People remained loyal to Richard Nixon, despite the smoking gun, because he was a Republican president. And when George Bush announced that the most qualified man in the country was Dan Quayle, I saw good, honest, wise Republicans swallow, click their heels and step in line. Partisanship was the ultimate claim on their loyalty, not judgment and rational analysis of the evidence.

**BOK:** The word "partisan" can mean two things. On the one hand, it can mean some very brave people who undertake to struggle against, for instance, the Nazis, many other people. On the other hand, it can mean people who abandon judgment. And one has to think, you know, which is the one that's at play? And unfortunately, very often, the first can turn into the second unless one is very careful to think about certain moral values that one will uphold whether or not one is going to act in a partisan way.

**MOYERS:** And it becomes hardest, does it not, to uphold these standards in a time of crisis, of challenge, of trauma?

**BOK:** Yes, definitely. That's when it becomes very tempting to say, "Well, I'm going to let go of my principles now. I do have, for instance, the principle that I shouldn't take innocent life, but just for now, because we are under all this threat, I'm going to let go of that principle, and maybe a couple of others as well."

**MOYERS:** You say, in *Strategy for Peace*, that our problems are so severe that unless we can marshal a principled collective response, all the worst predictions of social collapse may finally

be coming true. And that's a hope I share, but history argues otherwise, because previous generations didn't take principled and collective action in time to stave off the threats they faced in their own day. What makes you think we can do it better or differently?

**BOK:** I think that it certainly is true, looking back through history, that a number of societies have collapsed because they didn't take issues of survival seriously enough. On the other hand, they have never been in this predicament that we are in now. Now we're in it together, and I think that may force us, for the first time, to take the common interest into consideration. But then I would also say that there are other factors that give me some hope. I'm not at all wanting to say that everything is rosy. On the contrary, this is a very serious situation. But there is some hope. The other factors are, first of all, that our century, because it has been so unbelievably violent, and so brutal, and so filled with tyranny, our century has also brought forth countervailing powers.

We've had popular movements seeking change nonviolently, and, in fact, succeeding more and more often. It began, in some ways, with Gandhi in India. We've had the American civil rights struggle. Since then, we've had the Philippines, where Corazon Aquino specifically referred to Martin Luther King and to Mohandas Gandhi. Now we have Burma weighing in the balance. We've had Argentina undergoing a peaceful change, Spain undergoing a peaceful change. That's one thing. Then we also have all kinds of research that people didn't have in past generations about how to solve conflicts nonviolently. We have better history. We know much better how wars start and how they can get out of hand — all the research, for instance, that's been done on the First World War. So, I think that we are in a better position if we were to seize this opportunity.

**MOYERS:** Do we need a new ethic for this predicament?

**BOK:** I don't think we need a new ethic at all, and there are various people who insist that nothing will change until, somehow, our human consciousness changes or we develop some new way of thinking. Even Einstein said that, unless we all become much more altruistic and charitable — but I think, in a way, it's a little too late to hope for that. There I would say, myself, that I'm not at all sure that the human race can change in that way, and I'm not at all sure that, if there were some cataclysmic change of consciousness, that it would be for the better. It could very easily be for the worse, and we've seen sometimes how that's taken over in countries like Nazi Germany and others. So that we don't need a new ethic at all, but what we do need, I think, is to concentrate more than we have before on the moral principles and the moral values that we have in common, also, with people of other religions and other cultures. I would say, first of all, that nonviolence, to the extent possible, that doesn't mean it is always going to be possible, but nonviolence is one of the two most important factors, the other being trying to avoid lying.

**MOYERS:** True, but everywhere I look I find evidence of Moslem against Jew, Christian against Christian.

**BOK:** The trouble is that those principles have never been held very high when it's come to outsiders, to enemies of any kind. So what we now need to do is to take those same principles, so that it becomes just as awful for us to take an innocent life in our own country as to take it somewhere else. And that will take a little rethinking on the part of a lot of people, but it's not a transformation of the human spirit.

Now, then, the third principle, I think, is that of constraints on betrayal, or breaches of law, or breaches of promise. Now, again, every single culture has had to develop some notion of promise-keeping, of covenant or something like that. And the notion that to breach that would constitute betrayal. So those are three very, very ancient principles. In our day, it would involve obeying the law, for instance, also.

Then there is a fourth, and that is a constraint on secrecy, because if we don't constrain secrecy, then all the other things can go on and we don't even know they're going on. There can be violence within communities, or on the part of governments or what have you. There can be deception. There can be betrayal, violations of law, many other similar things.

**MOYERS:** You think that we could begin to shape it; a minimum moral framework for the world to cooperate on this, to solve this predicament of survival?

**BOK:** I do believe so. I think that this is, in fact, what a number of governments are trying to do, and, of course, international law is based, to some extent, on those four principles.

**MOYERS:** But every government violates international law when it finds it expedient to do so:

we in Nicaragua, the Soviets in Afghanistan, the British.

**BOK:** That doesn't mean, by the way, every government, you know. There are—but still, a number of governments have done so, and I think it has backfired very badly for them—certainly the Soviets in Afghanistan and for us also.

**MOYERS:** The tendency seems to be in the opposite direction from the collaboration and cooperation that you're calling for.

**BOK:** That's where this epidemic of peace may also give some hope, because the more governments become democratic and undergo a democratic and peaceful change—and then, you know, become more eager to abide by international law, more eager to deal nonviolently with other nations—the more of those governments there will be, the fewer of the others. And then, perhaps, the world can focus much more on the pockets that still remain, the very problematic pockets. But, it has been almost impossible to do so long as in every continent there was some war going on.

**MOYERS:** Bring this down to the level of one person out there listening. So many people in this country feel helpless to effect any change. "How can I make a difference? What can I do? She's talking about international organizations, governments up there and over there. She's talking about organizations into which I don't go. What can I do to make a difference, or can I?"

**BOK:** If you take Gandhi and Martin Luther King and their movements, if you look at those very often they started in very, very piecemeal ways. People began doing something in one community, and then expanded. Gandhi started that way; Martin Luther King started that way. And there are lots of people, I would say, all over the world—you know, we often hear that there are no heroes; I think that there are lots of heroes.

**MOYERS:** I cherish very much the notion in the conclusion of your book about starting personal and piecemeal, about carving out a space in one's own life where one begins to practice, personally, what one advocates politically and publicly.

**BOK:** And there I think, again, if one takes these principles that I've mentioned—you know, let's say that you want to carve out in your own life what Gandhi sometimes called a zone of peace, or something like that, and just say that, "In my family, and at work, and wherever I have human contacts I am simply not going to engage in manipulation of people. I'm not going to be coercive, violent with respect to them." Already, that will make a difference and that'll have an effect on some other people. And then if one can say, "In our community, we're simply not going to deal with one another this way." And I would say that that is a form of maturing, of saying, "Alright, I know that I can get things my way by manipulating people, but I'm not going to do that. I'm going to see if I can work another way." Simone Weil once spoke of that as—she talked about herself and she said, "I would like to achieve the kind of radiance that can bring about nonviolently what other people might have to do violently." And, of course, we see teachers like that. We see parents like that, who have a kind of radiance so that they don't have to raise their voice, they don't have to beat their children or anything like that. They simply make a different atmosphere.

**MOYERS:** So in this personal zone, I don't act violently against my family. I keep my promises, my vows, my oaths. I don't deceive. I practice, right in that small circle, what one would hope one's neighbor and one's government would practice.

**BOK:** I don't give up on the government at all, because one thing I have to do then, if I'm engaged in this, is to make every effort to see to it that the government, for instance, doesn't slip into further practices of secrecy; that there are protests when disinformation takes place; that there is concern for individuals, innocent civilians who are being killed. So that all of that means that the private individual, while he or she is doing this, sort of, within that personal zone, also reaches outward, reaches toward the profession and the government. And I think that people often ask the wrong question when they think about violence and deception and they say, "Do you mean that there should never be any lies anymore?" Or, you know, that "I should never defend myself by means of force?"

**MOYERS:** Or keep a secret—

**BOK:** Or ever keep a secret, that's right. Or never, never break a promise. That is the wrong question. And, I think, instead, the question is, "How can we roll back the amount of violence, the amount of lying, the amount of breaches of promise and of law? How can we just move back, roll that back so that there is less of it?" Because, if we don't manage to roll that back,

then we're not going to manage to cope with our common problems, then I don't think we're going to manage to cope with the social problems we have, and we certainly won't, in the long run, be able to cope with those of survival—namely the nuclear threat and the environmental threats—if we can't manage to work together. And how could we manage to work together if we're so distrustful of one another, for very good reasons, namely that we're always doing these things to one another. There is so much that individuals can do, but I think that they do need to have some hope, and it's much too early to give up hope. And I think you would probably agree with that, too, that people—

**MOYERS:** What was it your mother said? It's not worthy of human beings to give up?

**BOK:** It is not worthy of us, as human beings, with all that we've been given, really, in this extraordinary creation, it's not worthy of us to simply give up and say, "Well, looking back at history, I'm now going to declare that there's no hope."

**MOYERS:** /voice-over/ From her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, this has been a conversation with Sissela Bok. I'm Bill Moyers.

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