



# BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

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**Barbara Tuchman**

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## Barbara Tuchman

**BILL MOYERS:** *(on camera)* I'm Bill Moyers. Two hundred years ago this month, Congress wrote out its instructions for America's first presidential election. Everyone knew the only candidate would be the nation's greatest hero, George Washington. This year America is rallying to a different hero, Tom Cruise, a 26-year-old movie actor who made his name playing hustlers and studs. That's what the World Almanac found out when it polled high school students to see who their heroes are, the people in public life they most admire. Tom Cruise won.

So what explains this long leap from the revolutionary patriot to the Hollywood actor? One distinguished American historian says, there were giants in the earth in those days, and they didn't need scripts. Join me in a conversation with Barbara Tuchman.

*(voice-over)* You asked the question not long ago, "What's happened to the America of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson?" In writing the First Salute, have you found the answer?

**BARBARA TUCHMAN:** It was terribly exciting, the American Revolution. I don't think they thought at the beginning of establishing a new form of government, but very soon they realized that that was what they were doing. And that was extremely—that was very exhilarating, the idea that they had the opportunity to create a new political system. We have nothing that's exhilarating, nothing that's drawing us forward. A negative vision, you know, like stopping the Russians, or containing the Russians, or whatever, doesn't get anybody very excited. But something more seems to me to have happened, and that is the loss of—and now I get moralistic—of a moral sense, which I think has caused a great deal of change from the kind of people we were. A moral sense of knowing the difference between right and wrong and of being governed by it. I mean I think for example it's not only true in white collar crime as we read about every day, but in criticism, for example, where critics of art and drama and so on—I hesitate to say—and of authors—

**MOYERS:** Well, you may include journalists too, if you wish.

**TUCHMAN:** All right. — will accept, as great almost any damned thing, you know, that they think is funny or they think is one thing or another, without any standard at all and without any real belief, just because it will sell or it tickles the art dealers or it's got some attraction to the mass public, but is trashy basically. The acceptance of that kind of thing is an absence of moral sense. And we're being fed on this kind of—well, all I can say is trash, through. I regret to say your, the organ of television. I've never seen a program of Miami Vice but I don't suppose it's very uplifting. Or some of the others of that type. Which are concerned, as the ads always tell you, with crime, horror, terror, pornography, and various forms of vice. I mean, that's what they advertise themselves as. But that's not going to create a public which is concerned with or even recognizes the better, or at least - I know it's a pejorative word, the better - but the values in life that are creative.

**MOYERS:** Well, if taste or moral standards have declined, people have less fear of the public judgment —

**TUCHMAN:** Yes.

**MOYERS:** — that once upon a time would have said, let's throw the rascals out.

**TUCHMAN:** Yes. That's right. That's absolutely true.

**TUCHMAN:** You're not surprised anymore, you're just used to it.

**MOYERS:** But how different is that from any period of American history, but take the Revolutionary period which you write about. Some of the movers and shakers of this country were guilty of some of the very conduct that you find so alarming today. John Hancock profited from the privateer navy that looted during the Revolutionary War. Robert Morris, one of the signers of the Declaration, charged such high prices for food in those days that the people revolted against him. Couldn't it be that what you characterize as the evils of the Modern Age are just endemic to every age?

**TUCHMAN:** I think they are, the question is when they become prevailing that makes the difference. Honest conduct doesn't arouse any respect anymore, and that must ultimately turn back against us. Then we will suffer the results. I think that we've already seen that we've been suffering from it ever since Watergate, where it became very apparent, and then the Iran-Contra business where are—

**MOYERS:** Private war, in effect.

**TUCHMAN:** Yes, they were off the reservation, and they're going to keep on going off, I suppose, more and more.

**MOYERS:** You and I first held a conversation on television like this 15 years ago during the height of the Watergate scandals. And I would not have hoped or even thought that later, 15 years later, we'd be discussing a similar manifestation of the extreme possibilities of a government run amok. I would have thought we would have learned, to quote the historian, the lesson of history.

**TUCHMAN:** Well, it moves very slowly, history, history's lessons. I remember using this example for the Middle Ages, when the sewage wasn't properly disposed of. People didn't pay attention to it until the waters of the rivers and so on and the fifth rose over the doorsteps. Then they had to. So that's, I think, what is beginning to happen. It is going to rise over the doorsteps. It is already, isn't it?

**MOYERS:** Now we have the Pentagon scandals, perhaps the biggest swindle in American public life. What does it say when we don't grow angry over this banality and stupidity in high office?

**TUCHMAN:** Well, it says that we're becoming accustomed to and almost satisfied with people in government who are venal and—either venal or stupid. And we are going to be, I'm afraid, as it goes along—especially with the emphasis on fundraising for all elections, which is ruining the electoral system—accepting entertainers as our candidates.

**MOYERS:** People who are likable and avuncular and pleasing on the air?

**TUCHMAN:** Not only that, but keep as is—whose activity has been, in life, entertainment—

**MOYERS:** Not public affairs.

**TUCHMAN:** Not public affairs, and you can't govern without having the training in it. Even Plato, I think, said that a long time ago: that you need to be trained in government, to exercise it, to practice it. But the American public is now satisfying itself with being interested in entertainers. I was at a seminar some time ago, a few weeks ago, really, down at the Smithsonian. They held a conference or whatever on the subject of the hero, because it was the 50th anniversary of the birth of Superman. And I guess I should have realized that that was what it was about, that the level would not be exactly my idea of a hero. And it certainly was not. It was quite weird, what they considered heroes. The real hero of the discussion was this little girl who'd fallen down a well, and everybody was rescuing her. I mean, after all, she didn't do anything to make herself a hero. She was just in the news. And other heroes they discussed were Elvis Presley and somebody called, which I had never heard of, the Mayflower Madam. Who was that?

**MOYERS:** She was a woman who ran a brothel near my apartment in New York City.

**TUCHMAN:** Yes, but, why was she a hero? I don't know. But they were confusing, as I tried to say finally, standing up and getting totally fed up—that they were confusing—celebrity and notoriety with the word hero. And this was not the definition of the word hero. Well, they said, this was pop heroes, pop culture. Since this is what public opinion takes as heroes, then that's what a hero should be.

Well, this discussion was really—it was really scary, this definition of hero. Fortunately, I had taken the precaution of looking up the word hero in the dictionary before I went down there. And one of the attributes of a hero, according to the dictionary, apart from being originally half-mortal and half-divine and performing deeds of valor, was a person of nobility of purpose. And I quoted it in this seminar, which everybody thought was rather extraneous to the whole problem of Superman, etc. But the change in the recognition of the nature of a hero, compared to what you and I were brought up to consider a hero, was just as scary as the acceptance nowadays of the corruption of the

moral sense.

**MOYERS:** It brings to mind something you wrote during the Watergate crisis, when you said that the American presidency has become a greater risk than it is worth. You said, something has changed. It's no longer "my country, right or wrong" — and that may not be necessarily good — but it's "my president, right or wrong."

**TUCHMAN:** Yes. Yes.

**MOYERS:** So that the loyalty's been transferred from the country to the man, from the institution to the incumbent.

**TUCHMAN:** And no man can support that. The only person who ever did was George Washington, who's my example of the true hero, who was a remarkable man in every aspect of his character. In spite of this — of the terrible frustrations and difficulties that he faced when all the generals were pouring letters onto his desk telling him of their shortages, you know, no shoes, no money, no food; when there were — in one area there were plenty of thin, starving steer that were ready to be slaughtered for meat, they couldn't slaughter them because they couldn't pay butchers to salt them because they didn't have any ready cash, and the butchers wouldn't do it without cash.

Every aspect of running a large military, a war, was a frustration. And when it was over, you know, and he said his farewell, gave up his commission and at the famous scene where he said goodbye, and he took out a pair of glasses, which nobody'd ever seen him wear before, put them on and said, "I have grown gray in your service and my eyes have" — I forget the exact words — and he put on these glasses — it makes me cry too — all the soldiers wept because they loved him, you know, they admired him so. It was very moving. Just this gesture, putting on glasses for the first time in public. When my daughter was helping me with the problem of filling out the notes and the annotations, and I was carrying on about my agonies over loss of eyesight, and our slogan became, think of George. We always wanted to call that — give that the title for the book.

**MOYERS:** Think of George.

**TUCHMAN:** Think of George. Because he overrode all this in the most extraordinary way.

**MOYERS:** Is it romantic, Ms. Tuchman, to believe that in this era of politics by the tube, mass communications, that politicians can think of George when they get to the White House, or are they subjecting themselves to an impossible imperative?

**TUCHMAN:** Well, they certainly — the next one will be. He's going to have a — whoever it is is going to have to enter a really difficult situation, won't he? Maybe the person could think of George and find the stamina and the faith — the real thing he had was faith. He had such faith in Providence, as he called it. Providence will prevail.

I mean the very decision to march his army all the way from New York to Washington on foot! Because he had made this arrangement with the French — decided to increase their help and lend a fleet. And this was arranged across an ocean by letter. You know, no telephone, no telegraphs, no satellites, no nothing but letters. It was a miracle, I believe, in many ways. And his belief that it would work, you know, especially that Cornwallis would stay put long enough to be trapped — which he did. And his investing his reputation, the army, the fate of the Revolution, in this one adventure of marching down to Virginia from New York; it was a tremendous dare.

**MOYERS:** You've described a pretty hopeless, or at least a pretty desperate situation in terms of our public morals today. Would we think of a Washington as almost an oddity?

**TUCHMAN:** Well, you know, the trouble is that our public men are really artificial. They're created by the most devastating tool that technology's invented, which is the TelePrompTer. They don't speak spontaneously. You don't hear them meet a situation out of their own minds. They read this thing that's going along there in front of them. Words that have been created for them by PR men or by advertisers or whatever. And this is not the real man that we see. And it allows an inadequate, minor individual to appear to be a statesman, because he's got very good speechwriters. Mr. Reagan. Boy. And to read the stuff off, because he reads it very well. He's an actor, I guess, a trained actor. In any event, you never know that he's reading. Nor do you really know this with

any of them. They learn it very fast. But the TelePrompTer— is a really, in my opinion, it's a terrible tool, because what we have is an artificial result.

**MOYERS:** And yet George Washington had Alexander Hamilton as a speechwriter. The Farewell Address, his final major statement as he exited the presidency, was largely penned by Alexander Hamilton. Is there a correlation?

**TUCHMAN:** No, because the TelePrompTer shows the person in a situation which is not real, and which is phony, and which is deceptive. The thing is, you see, that we're a public that is brought up on deception, through advertising. From the moment we are children, we learn that some kind of cereal is going to make us strong and win races and one thing and another, and the next thing you know, if you use a particular kind of toothpaste, you're going to marry Gary Cooper, or at least have a glamorous romance somewhere; all that is deception. But we're — we grow up on it, and we're accustomed to being deceived. We allow ourselves to be deceived. Advertising is really responsible for a lot, I think, in the deterioration of the American public perceptions.

**MOYERS:** Would you ban the use of the political commercial, the 30-second, the 60-second spot?

**TUCHMAN:** Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely. I think we should have a law of some kind that would require political appearance to be live.

**MOYERS:** So that you can see the men think aloud.

**TUCHMAN:** Yes.

**MOYERS:** On their feet.

**TUCHMAN:** Yes. It should be live, and it should be more than 30 seconds.

**MOYERS:** You've said on other occasions that the media age has caused us to put into the presidency a person who is likable and avuncular, but who's ill-equipped for the office. And when I read that, I thought, however, that we had likable and avuncular presidents who were ill-equipped for the office prior to the age of television. Warren Harding, for example.

**TUCHMAN:** Yes. Yes. But we didn't have circumstances that were so demanding.

**MOYERS:** What do you mean?

**TUCHMAN:** The circumstances which surround us are very dangerous in many ways, and they are very high-pressured, and they are very difficult to deal with. Look at our CIA-type activities. For one thing, it seems to me, our government is so concerned with knowing everything that's happening, every tiny little thing, that they know far too much, because it's not knowledge. But information about what's going on, you know, in this little place or that little place, and it isn't a real knowledge of the local area that they want to act in. At the time of the Vietnam War, I interviewed Bob McNamara, the French had been there for 30 years or how many years — we were defeated by these fellows in black pajamas who weren't supposed to have any power. And he said, "but we didn't know. We didn't know." And this is so revealing, because the fact is it was perfectly easy to know what was the situation in Vietnam, what the people were like. We had foreign service officers writing all kinds of reports.

**MOYERS:** I think that in our collective wisdom the American people did learn from the Vietnam experience, not to let another president take us into a war unless he can present overwhelming evidence that our national security was clearly at stake. Don't you find that encouraging?

**TUCHMAN:** Yes, I think we have learned from that - I think the public has learned from that which is the important thing. I think it's also clear that when you try to fight a prolonged war without national support you lose. You can't do it because the public just won't stand for it. I mean it took a long time for protest on Vietnam to make itself felt but it did.

**MOYERS:** Then why do governments persist in folly?

**TUCHMAN:** Aha. That's exactly the point. The point is that they persist in folly because they don't want to let go of their position, of their power, and they are afraid that if they let go and if they say, "we were wrong, or we're doing the wrong thing," they will be booted out, or they will lose their status. If you're a lesser individual it's not wanting to be left out of the next White House luncheon.

**MOYERS:** Cyrus Vance is the only high official in recent memory who resigned a high post in protest to his president's decisions. Even though Secretary Shultz and Secretary Weinberger said that they opposed the Iran-contra, the Iran sales, they—

**TUCHMAN:** -they didn't make it stick. They didn't stand up for it.

**MOYERS:** What does that say to you?

**TUCHMAN:** Well, this is a weakening of conscience, of what I said before was the moral sense.

**MOYERS:** You described yourself as a storyteller, a narrator of true stories. If you were writing about America today what do you think would be the chief theme of the book?

**TUCHMAN:** Well, I'd like it to be the feeling that was felt about America at the time of its beginnings. I mean why did the, for example, why did the French nobles— why did they all go with such elan to fight over here? What did they believe in? And the description of liberty by Americans was very exciting even though it represented the reverse of what those people lived by but the belief in what America would mean for many people in Europe as well as over here was extraordinary. You know Lafayette brought home with him a container of enough earth to be buried in, and when he died he was buried in it.

**MOYERS:** In France.

**TUCHMAN:** In France, in American soil, yes. Isn't that extraordinary.

**MOYERS:** Does it help in confronting a steady procession of images to read history. One could say, "the past is past, let the dead bury the dead, history is behind us." Is there a value to reading history?

**TUCHMAN:** Well for one thing it's frightfully interesting I think. You know when people say "what's the use of reading history?" I say, "well what's the use of Beethoven's Sonata?" I mean you don't have to have a use, a tangible use. You have to have something that makes life more valuable, and to me reading history does, even though it only shows what is passed. Coleridge, I think it was, said - this wonderful line - he said "history is only a lantern on the stem." It tells you where you've been. Well that's worth knowing; where you've been.