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Moyers Fights Back

by JOHN NICHOLS

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The Bush Administration allies who have taken over the Corporation for Public Broadcasting may have thought they could turn public television into another of their echo chambers without a fight. But they didn't count on Bill Moyers.

Moyers, who secured thirty Emmys during three decades on PBS, stormed out of retirement May 15 to condemn manipulations of the network's content and programming engineered by Kenneth Tomlinson, the Republican chair of the CPB board of directors, and to call for a renewed commitment to principled journalism at PBS and throughout American media. "I simply never imagined that any CPB chairman, Democrat or Republican, would cross the line from resisting White House pressure to carrying it out for the White House. But that's what Kenneth Tomlinson has done," Moyers told more than 2,000 activists, academics and journalists gathered in St. Louis for the National Conference for Media Reform. Moyers, who stepped down in December as the host of the highly regarded PBS program *NOW With Bill Moyers*, detailed Tomlinson's partisan meddling, from the hiring of Bush aides and allies to fill key positions at the CPB to his allocation of \$5 million in tax money to develop a weekly broadcast featuring the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal*. But his main focus was the revelation that Tomlinson spent \$10,000 last year to hire a contractor to monitor *NOW* and report on its supposed political bias. "Gee, Ken, for \$2.50 a week, you could pick up a copy of *TV Guide* on the newsstand. A subscription is even cheaper, and I would have sent you a coupon that can save you up to 62 percent," joked Moyers. "Hell, you could have called me--collect--and I would have told you what was on the broadcast that night." (The full text of Moyers's speech is at www.commondreams.org/views05/0516-34.htm.)

But Moyers was not just poking fun at Tomlinson--he was fighting back. He revealed that he'd written Tomlinson, suggesting that the pair debate the network's future on a PBS program of Tomlinson's choice, and called for the release of the results of the *NOW* monitoring. He also endorsed a call by Consumers Union, Media Access Project, Common Cause, the Consumer Federation of America and Free Press for a campaign "to take public broadcasting back--to take it back from threats, from interference, from those who would tell us we can only think what they command us to think." The groups plan to hold hearings around the country. In addition, there's a national petition campaign (www.freepress.net/action/pbs) to stop "top-down partisan meddling" with the network that seemed more timely than ever the day after Moyers spoke, when it was revealed that the GOP majority on the CPB board were scheming to redirect money from news coverage to music programming and preparing an "examination" of NPR's Middle East coverage for evidence of bias.

Taking back PBS is merely the most urgent of the media reform initiatives highlighted at the conference, which also discussed moves to label so-called video "news" releases produced by the government and corporations; to close the digital divide by developing broadband wireless services as public utilities; and to reverse media consolidation. None of these fights will be won, however, without expanding the media reform movement beyond its current progressive base--making permanent the left-right coalition that emerged in 2003 to successfully beat back plans to rewrite ownership rules. Moyers held out hope for such a coalition, reading a letter from Congressman Ron Paul, a Texas conservative who praised *NOW*, and recalling that when President Nixon sought to cut funding for public affairs programming on PBS, it was saved because "there were still Republicans in America who did not march in ideological lockstep and who stood on principle against politicizing public television." Tomlinson will not be stopped by Democrats alone; Republicans must step up too and say, "Hands off PBS."

About John Nichols

John Nichols, a pioneering political blogger, has written *The Beat* since 1999. His posts have been circulated internationally, quoted in numerous books and mentioned in debates on the floor of Congress. Nichols writes about politics for *The Nation* magazine as its Washington correspondent. He is a contributing writer for *The Progressive* and *In These Times* and the associate editor of the *Capital Times*, the daily newspaper in Madison, Wisconsin. His articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and dozens of other newspapers. He is the co-author, with Robert W. McChesney, of *The Death and Life of American Journalism*, just published by Nation Books. [more...](#)

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