

# An Open Letter to Bill Moyers

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By ARTHUR SCHLESINGER JR.

Dear Bill

No one can question the power of television to inform, to educate, to persuade—and to mislead. As an historian, I have therefore watched the recent outpouring of quasi-historical essays on the tiny screen with mixed feelings. Little is more effective than a responsible television rendition of history; little more mischievous than an irresponsible rendition.

One must distinguish, I suppose, between dramatizations and documentaries. When actors impersonate historical figures, the viewers know (I trust) that they are not really seeing Truman fire MacArthur but some re-enacted version thereof. This is not history but historical fiction. Yet even a television drama, like a good historical novel, ought to pay a decent respect to the facts. If it is true, for example, that the scene in a recent show depicting Joe McCarthy in his hospital ward raving like a lunatic was made up, that is surely inexcusable.

Documentaries raise sharper issues of responsibility. They show us real people in newscip or interview and purport to tell us what actually happened. A documentary represents itself not as fiction but as history. It demands to be judged therefore at the least by the standards of good popular history.

Your show on June 10, "The CIA's Secret Army," was a highly effective piece of television. Haynes Johnson of The Washington Post called it "the most powerful, disturbing television news special I've ever seen." It left powerful and disturbing impressions in the minds of the audience. "The broadcast was notable," said The Nation (admiringly), "for the strong conclusions it forced upon the viewer." Among the conclusions forced on The Nation were that John Kennedy was "determined to bring [Castro] down by whatever dreadful means—including the use of gangsters and every refinement of the assassin's art" and that the missile crisis was "the result of Kennedy's own bungled attempts . . . to eliminate Fidel Castro."

Such allegedly hard-headed newspapermen as Jimmy Breslin ("this story about Kennedy trying to have Castro assassinated") and Miles McMillin ("a shocking and almost unbelievable story of the assassination conspiracy on the part of the Kennedys") came away with the same impressions. None of these commentators appeared to know any more about these incidents than you care to tell them in your show. Haynes Johnson, who once wrote an excellent book on the Bay of Pigs, did know more and criticized your show as "singularly one-dimensional" and as "bad history." Most of your viewers, though, shared the ignorance of Messrs. Breslin and McMillin, not the knowledge of Mr. Johnson. They relied on you for a balanced presentation of facts.

## A Friend of the Kennedys

I write this with some reluctance because I am sufficiently known as a friend of the Kennedys and run the risk of having anything I say discounted for that reason. I might perhaps add that I regard the secret war against Cuba as a blot on the Kennedy administration and eminently worth exposure and condemnation. But the available facts refute your portrait of the Kennedys as, in Haynes Johnson's words, "the villains of the piece—the agents of deceit" and, of course, the instigators of assassination.

Take, for example, the assassination question. You concede that the CIA set out

to murder Castro well before Kennedy took office, that it hired the Mafia for this purpose in the Eisenhower administration. But you do not say, as a fair-minded historian would, that not a scintilla of hard evidence has ever emerged to show that Kennedy, or Eisenhower for that matter, authorized, or even knew about, the CIA murder plots.

You try to deal with this problem by putting Richard Bissell of the CIA before the camera to talk about a presumed presi-

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dential wish that such abhorrent operations be deniable. But why did you not also interview, for example, Thomas Parrott, the CIA officer who served as secretary of the Special Group? Mr. Parrott told the Church Committee that Allen Dulles's practice as head of CIA was to insist on specific orders rather than "tacit approval." Mr. Parrott said he found Mr. Bissell's theory of the circumlocutory approach "hard to believe." Mr. Bissell himself characterized his own theory when he testified before the Church Committee as no more than "my guess." This is pretty casual evidence on which to make the most damning innuendo about Presidents.

You say, correctly, that the CIA briefed Robert Kennedy about the Mafia plot in 1962. You do not say that the reason they briefed him was, not to rejoice with him in their exploits, but to get him to call off the prosecution of Robert Maheu, a CIA associate, in a wiretapping case. Kennedy, you say, "may have thought the plot had been discontinued. Still, his response was instructive." May have thought? The man who did the briefing testified unequivocally that he told Kennedy "the activity had been terminated." As for Kennedy's response the briefer said, "If you have seen Mr. Kennedy's eyes get steely and his jaw set and his voice get low and precise, you get a definite feeling of unhappiness."

Your program implies that the celebrated Operation Mongoose had as one of its objectives the assassination of Castro. In fact, this is all in the Church Committee report; its objectives were intelligence and sabotage, never the assassination of Castro. You say that Mongoose "aimed for the overthrow of Castro by October 1962." In fact, that target date was no more than a proposal. It was never approved as a Mongoose objective. You introduce haphazardly a reference to "sensitive work" in a 1962 memorandum by General Lansdale, the man in nominal charge of Mongoose, without quoting General Lansdale's statement to the Church Committee that this phrase did not refer to assassination and that he "never took up assassination with either the Attorney General or the President."

You imply that the assassination attempt all came to an end with Kennedy's death; there were, you say, "no new assassination plots." Yet having read the Church Committee report you must be well aware that the CIA kept trying to kill Castro till the summer of 1965. Lyndon

Johnson apparently knew as little what the CIA was up to as his predecessor had known.

Quite apart from one's judgment of the character of the Kennedys, there are strong circumstantial reasons to conclude that they knew nothing about CIA's continuing assassination activity. John McCone, the CIA director, did not know about it. His subordinates deliberately kept him in the dark. Would these subordinates have told the Kennedys—and then told them not to tell Mr. McCone, their intimate friend?

There is the problem too of the Bay of Pigs prisoners, whom the Kennedys were determined to bring out of Cuba. Nothing would have doomed these prisoners more surely than an assassination attempt on Castro. And there is the fact, which you implicitly omit, that the Kennedys in the autumn of 1963 were actually exploring the normalization of American relations with Castro at the same time that the CIA was still trying to kill him. You could have put our friend William Attwood of Newsday on the screen to tell that story. As an American ambassador at the UN, he was the official conducting the explorations.

## Castro & Khrushchev Argued

Your history is aliphod and polemical. Do you really believe, as you seemed to say, that, if Kennedy had not cancelled an air strike, the Bay of Pigs would have succeeded? That 1,500 men on the beachhead would have defeated Castro's 200,000 men? As for the idea that the secret war caused the missile crisis, you surely know that, though Castro wanted Soviet arms he did not want nuclear missiles. Khrushchev wanted them in Cuba for his own reasons. "When Castro and I talked about the problem," Khrushchev said in his memoirs, "we argued and argued. Our argument was very heated. But, in the end, Fidel agreed with me." The nuclear missiles were installed—and the missile crisis resulted—because Khrushchev wished to alter the world's balance of power, not because Castro wished protection against Kennedy.

The implicit message of your program is really the exculpation of the CIA. You present an obedient, compliant agency thrust into excess by the bludgeonings of the Kennedys. Yet repeated investigations, internal and external, have shown that CIA operatives had plenty of initiative of their own. They started planning the Castro assassination and approached the Mafia before they even informed Mr. Dulles, not to mention anyone higher, and, as we have seen, they never informed Mr. McCone they were continuing the work.

As early as 1956, David Bruce and Robert Lovett reported to the President's Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities, "No one, other than those in the CIA immediately concerned with their day to day operation, has any detailed knowledge of what is going on." The Board itself the next year described the CIA's covert action branch as "operating for the most part on an autonomous and free-wheeling basis." In the last month of the Eisenhower administration, it called for "a total reassessment of our covert action policies." The CIA was a rogue elephant from way back. I am sorry to see you fall for its latest disinformation campaign.

## Flagrant One-Sidedness

The flagrant one-sidedness of your show is difficult to understand. In your two hours you screened 18 interviews, of which 13 were self-serving talks with former CIA people and their Cuban spooks—nearly all

presented as if these were honorable witnesses whose word was gospel. The other three were Castro, Somoza and Senator Morgan. I am astonished that in the interests of historical responsibility you did not find time to interview others knowledgeable about those events and give the show at least a pretense of balance—William Attwood, for example, or Richard Goodwin or General Lansdale or McGeorge Bundy or Theodore Sorensen.

Long ago Edward R. Murrow had a famous documentary report on Joe McCarthy. It was brilliantly done, but it deeply worried the late Gilbert Seides, who remains to this day the most thoughtful commentator television has ever had. Mr. Seides detested Senator McCarthy as much as Mr. Murrow did, but he saw dangers in doing what Mr. Murrow had done—employing the resources of television to create "an integrated, one-sided picture of McCarthy." Edward R. Murrow's "See It Now" series, Mr. Seides said, had up to that point given its audience confidence that each show "will have a specific gravity, that it will be important, and, above all, that it will be what it claims to be"—an objective report. "See It Now" had rightly earned public trust because it resembled "the summing-up of a judge who marshals the evidence but does not prejudice the jury." The McCarthy report, Mr. Seides felt, abused that trust. "Except in this single instance," Mr. Seides said, the Murrow series "never was the summing-up of a hanging judge."

You, like Ed Murrow, have rightly earned the trust of your audience. This shabby, tendentious polemic abuses that trust. It was the summing-up of a hanging judge. I hope that in the end people will be able to say of you, as Gilbert Seides said of Edward R. Murrow, "except in this single instance."

Best regards,

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