Priests, Prophets and Palin: On Bill Moyers' confusion

Contributed by Dan Bednarz
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I wonder if viewers of Bill Moyers find his PBS Friday night program as uneven and occasionally exasperating and confused as I do. He can present empathic stories illustrating how our institutions crush the souls and materially deprive -- even threaten -- the lives of "ordinary" Americans.

On occasion he interviews truly "Prophetic" voices, such as Andrew Bacevich. Despite his identification with the common folk and deep suspicion of the Republicans, for the most part, Moyers hosts many "Priestly" experts, usually from the Ivy League, who comport themselves as above-the-fray, objective and value-free. They usually have little insight or understanding to offer in these times. No one assumes this priestly character better than regular guest Professor Kathleen Hall Jamieson, whose bio sketch on Moyer's website reads, "Jamieson has long been interested in making sure Americans get beneath the veneer of politics and campaigns."

Her appearance of Friday September 5th, the day after the closing of the Republican Convention, did not so much as touch the veneer. Despite an eloquent summary statement to Moyers on the importance of politicians addressing issues, Jamieson during this session showed that she has internalized the McCain meta-narrative about McCain's and Palin's reformer/maverick records. (This is, for those who can bear to recall, a reprise of G. W. Bush, the "Reformer with results.")

After a series of bizarre and curious charges and revelations, many of which are unresolved and deeply troubling for someone in the status of vice-presidential nominee, Jamieson said of Palin, "parts of [her] record are holding up well: of tax cutting and opposing some forms of special interest politics, standing up to big oil, for example…" This is nuance to the point of evasiveness. What does it mean to "oppos[e] some forms special interests"? It leaves open the door to supporting other forms while creating the impression that these other forms do not warrant further inquiry. Here's a revealing segment in which Jamieson ever so gently bullies an incredulous and deferential Moyers:

KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON: The story that Senator McCain will tell is that he named a reformer with a proven history of tax cutting and social responsibility and high accountability in taking on special interests such as the oil companies.

BILL MOYERS: But...

KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON: And energy expert.

BILL MOYERS: S...

KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON: Energy expert.

We will turn to energy in a moment. What can these abstractions "high accountability" and "Social responsibility" possibly mean? Jamieson gives no concrete examples -- and Moyers sure was not going to ask for any -- and this is especially disconcerting and listless coming from an expert in rhetoric, politics, public relations, and hermeneutics. Indeed, the evidence from Palin's record runs counter to these positive descriptions and includes political firings -- even attempting to dismiss a librarian for not banning books --, charges of violating privacy statutes by inspecting personnel records, and being caught flat out lying about contacts with the safety director -- to discuss her vendetta against her brother in law -- she subsequently fired. Now she's got a lawyer and the Anchorage newspaper is telling her to stop stonewalling the ethics investigation. Yep, parts of her record are really holding up.

Regarding energy policy, Sarah Palin is having her "populist views" on oil revised by the McCain campaign. Her previous statements on energy are hardly those of an expert; for example in July she said, "I beg to disagree with any candidate who would say we can't drill our way out of our problem." This is sheer fantasy in terms of petroleum geology, but it makes good political hay. Likewise, she dismisses most environmental concerns regarding energy and is quoted as saying that drilling in ANWR should proceed with all due haste; further she has overstated how much oil is likely to be there. The slogan merrily bantered around the Republican Convention and now on the campaign trail is "Drill, baby, drill."

I am willing to wager that Kathleen Hall Jamieson -- and perhaps Sarah Palin -- would guess that "peak oil" is the name of a new energy company, not the critical geological fact that makes ANWR and other drill your way out options irrelevant. Concluding that Palin is an expert on energy is about as credible as saying she's got foreign policy experience because she's the commander in chief of the Alaska National Guard and lives next door to Russia.

So here we have Jamieson, a professor of communications, rendering an opinion that a governor whose solution is to drill, drill, drill for oil is an energy expert. (Aside to Bill Moyers: How about having a geologist on to explain peak oil? And how about interviewing an ecologist -- a real ecologist -- to explain how the economy is dependent upon the Earth's eco-systems?)

Further, Jamieson took a revealing misstep when she scolded Soledad O'Brien -- three times by name -- for an error in her reporting on Palin. She informed Moyers, "Now you have a moment in which journalism has deceived its audience because in the rush to make this point about possible hypocrisy [of Palin], a major commentator on a major network has asserted as fact something which doesn't hold up." As I watched this segment Jamieson seemed peevish and I asked myself, "Why does this one anchor get called out by name for what appears to be a rather esoteric error? This happens routinely on cable news, often in more blatant and deceitful fashion, yet Jamieson is focusing on this one instance."

After dressing down O'Brien for failing to "fact check" Jamieson observed about the Bridge to Nowhere that Palin "opposed it pretty much after she'd favored it and after it was all but gone anyway and the state did take the money." How do you fact check "pretty much"? Again, misdirecting rhetoric is in play: "pretty much" opposed it "after she'd favored it." The "fact" is that Palin ran for governor supporting the Bridge to Nowhere project. There is no "pretty much" about it. More importantly, Jamieson spins the larger deception here: Palin's claim "I told Congress, Thanks but no thanks on that Bridge to Nowhere," is factually false with no room for contextual exoneration.

I suggest that if Jamieson wants the electorate to be informed she must confront the political deceit and manipulation inspiring such falsehoods. If Sarah Palin never told Congress "thanks, but no thanks" why does she keep repeating this line? Answer: because savants like Jamieson will let it pass, even while deceptively noting it. It follows that when Palin hired a lobbyist with ties to Senator Ted Stevens to gin up pork barrel earmarks for her town she was not a reformer, just another player the Washington money quest.

Palin's actual record undermines her claim to the mantle of reformer. Therefore, and here I'm making a supposition, some of it goes unmentioned, some of it is elided by Jamieson -- who loves to go on about checking facts -- because to bring this into focus would destroy the narratives of Sarah and John the reformers. Further, Palin's acceptance speech mocking of community organizers is another rather incongruous tactic for a reformer, so this example too is ignored. Finally, these reformer narratives are indispensable to the McCain ticket's election since they cannot run on Bush's record. And isn't it interesting that Jamieson did not analyze the uniqueness of the fact that Palin did not -- and presumably will not on the campaign trail -- mention Bush in her acceptance speech?

In a candid moment during the Republican convention Peggy Noonan -- thinking the microphones were off -- went "beneath the veneer of politics and campaigns" to opine on the selection of Palin, saying, "I think they [Republican Party] went for this -- excuse me -- political bullshit about narratives." Princeton professor Harry G. Frankfurt has written a book titled, On Bullshit, and after two political conventions and the priestly bobbing and weaving of Professor Jamieson it is a serious read.

In conclusion, there appears to be no place in Jamieson's worldview to reflect on the reality that politicians concoct and then purvey propaganda-filled narratives to win elections. In the end, Jamieson's "analysis" is an erudite expression of her beliefs.

Ultimately, though, we must ask why Bill Moyers, who has a strong prophetic streak and is capable of great journalism, continues to be fascinated by priests in an era of upheaval.

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Dan Bednarz will be speaking on the first day of the Sept. 21-23 meeting of Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas-USA in Sacramento. His panel is about Scenarios Planning for State and Local Government. Dan's other articles on Culture Change are:

"Al Gore's gamble" Aug. 5, 2008

culturechange.org

"Sicko and the Ecology of Health Care Reform" Aug. 2007

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"Peak Oil and the health care crisis in America" June 28, 2006

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