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: Cynus 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 stern.” It tells you where you’ve been. Well that’s worth knowing; where you’ve been.