



**THE BLOG** 04/29/2013 01:39 pm ET | Updated Jun 29, 2013

# Can't We All Just Not Get Along?



By Marty Kaplan

Maybe the problem with Washington isn't that there's too little comity — there's too much.

Old hands lament the passing of the era when, by day, partisans went after one another red in tooth and claw, but when the sun hit the treetops, the enmity took a breather. Thanks to the bourbon dispensed in Capitol hideaways and Georgetown salons, the gears of democracy were lubricated and America's business could get done. But today, this elegy goes, legislators race home to their districts instead of chillin' with the villains. The sealed ideological bubbles that politicians now inhabit prevent rivals from finding common ground after hours.

Conversely, democracy is also said to benefit from an adversarial free press. Its mission — speaking truth to power, without fear or favor — is the reason the Constitution protects the fourth estate. The Washington press corps is the watchdog of liberty. Being relentlessly skeptical may not make journalists popular, but it's a necessary tension.

Armistices in this 24/7 tribal warfare, Washington ethnographers tell us, are those occasional evenings devoted to bipartisan mingling and self-deprecating humor, like the Gridiron Club dinner, the Alfalfa Club dinner and above all the White House Correspondents' Association annual dinner, whose 2013 confab happened Saturday night. On those nights, hostility takes a holiday. Reporters break bread with the people they cover, Republicans and Democrats take a break from demonizing each other and comedy is a universal solvent for animus.

There are two problems with this account.

One is that the theoretically productive antagonism between the power and the press was long ago replaced by access journalism — the cultivation of official sources at the expense of telling uncomfortable truths about them. The tone of mainstream Washington journalism is set by prestige correspondents and anchors who are often better paid and more famous

than those they cover and interview. They sup with sources year round. Their common membership in the nation's power elite affects their work more than any hypothetical tension between their domains.

There are of course exceptions. A Jeremy Scahill or a Matt Taibbi could care less about whom they offend. But when politicians feel the press's lash, it is usually a function of the press taking sides the way politicians take sides. Fox News is indifferent to the risk of alienating Democratic sources, and MSNBC pulls no punches for Republicans. (And no, I'm not making a moral equivalence argument. Rachel Maddow and Chris Hayes give plenty of Democrats grief, and they go out of their way to book conservative guests and be gracious to them - something rather rare on right-wing cable news.) But the rule is chumminess. You don't need a White House Correspondents' Dinner to see Bill O'Reilly dine with Antonin Scalia; that happens in effect every night on *The Factor*, just without the rubber chicken.

The other problem with the conventional narrative — oh, for the good old days when Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill got tipsy together at Katharine Graham's table! — is that it diverts us from the real story of insider Washington, which is its common culture of nihilism.

Money makes Washington's wheels go round. The revolving door between officeholders and lobbyists, between regulators and the industries they regulate, between hacks and flacks, between politicians dialing for dollars and talking heads on the media payroll, is a bipartisan pathology. The big media moguls who bought tables on Saturday night, and who brought their big advertisers along to ogle the Hollywood stars that the evening turns out, are accustomed to buying friends on both sides of the aisle. The room, laughing at its own expense, is superficially sending the message that it doesn't take itself too seriously, but it's a disingenuous, wink-wink, postmodern self-critique. A press that's worthy of the journalism scholarships that tickets to the Correspondents' Dinner support would, for example, be all over the climate change story all the time, as if mitigating global warming were the only thing standing between us and the end of the world, instead of letting the fossil fuel industry and the fear of depressing or boring away the audience set the boundaries of adequate coverage.

That's why the establishment pushback to Stephen Colbert's 2006 routine at the Correspondents' Dinner was so vehement: he crossed a line. It was one thing for George W. Bush to show a video of himself at the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association dinner (one more of these affairs) searching beneath Oval Office furniture and saying, Nope, no weapons of mass destruction under here, as he did in 2004. But it was quite another for Colbert, on Washington's prom night, to tell stenography journalism's top practitioners that they're the problem:

*"Over the last five years you people were so good, over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew. But, listen, let's review the rules. Here's how it works. The President makes decisions. He's the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spell check and go home."*

I thought that President Obama and Conan O'Brien were both really funny at this year's White House Correspondents' Dinner. But whatever barbs they tossed were easily accommodated by the soothing meta-fiction machine that the whole incestuous enterprise amounts to. Commingle, self-deprecate, after-party with the owners. Just put 'em through a humility simulator and go home.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.*

**Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/martykaplan](http://www.twitter.com/martykaplan)**



**Marty Kaplan** 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director