

**THE BLOG**

In Praise (Yikes!) of Richard Cohen

By Marty Kaplan

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Back in the day, just after Jimmy Carter lost the 1980 election, president-elect Ronald Reagan came to Washington, where I then worked, for a visit. I vividly recall that the lone journalist who spoke out against the total capitulation of the Washington press corps to the incoming Reaganauts was Richard Cohen.

“Let’s Face It,” his Washington Post column was headlined, “Our City Is a Pushover For a Slick-Talkin’ Man.”

His lede, I acknowledge, betrayed no debt to feminism: “If Washington were a woman, it would have a reputation as easy.”

But if you can see past the sexism, the message was as savagely accurate then as it is today: “Say something nice about [the Washington press corps] and it will do anything you want. Pay attention to it, and you have it in the palm of your hand. Throw it a kiss and it’s yours. Flash it a smile and it goes weak in the knees. Invite it to dinner and it will, I swear, forgive everything that went before and forget everything that ever happened....”

“Better press [than Reagan] no man has ever had. The local papers and the vaunted national press corps, cynical in legend but clearly patsies for a little attention, have been writing up Ronald Reagan and his visit to town as if something has actually happened — something substantive, that is...”

Ironically, what Cohen called for, I think, though he of course didn’t put it this way, was less Fox, and more Colbert:

“What is missing [in the press corps] is the hard edge of cynicism — the sort of attitude that is supposed to be the state ethic of Missourians. We could use a little of it here. Instead, we seem to be getting a total lapse of critical faculties... The adoration of Ronald Reagan does no one any good. It doesn’t serve the people and it doesn’t serve Reagan himself. The public remains uninformed, and the president-elect blissfully content when he should be, at the very least, anxious. “

By now the apostasy of Richard Cohen has been widely anthologized in Blogistan. And there’s a lightyear between his take on Stephen Colbert’s takedown of Bush, and mine. (I’d like to see George Tenet’s Presidential Medal of Freedom taken away from him and given to Colbert.) But I didn’t want the moment to pass without a nostalgic shout-out to a column I’ve never forgotten, and a columnist who once railed against the dangers of the media being a lapdog to power.