

Liberal philistinism revisited: Richard Cohen on *Syriana*

David Walsh
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In a particularly swinish column published December 13, Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* attacked the film *Syriana*, directed by Stephen Gaghan and featuring George Clooney (who was also executive producer). Cohen accuses the Gaghan-Clooney film of being incomprehensible, clichéd and simplistic in its highly critical view of US foreign policy in the Middle East.

After citing a comment by *New York Times* reviewer A.O. Scott, who described the film as an “intriguing narrative about oil, terrorism, money and power,” Cohen writes: “You will not be surprised to learn that the locus for all this ‘oil, terrorism, money and power’ is the United States, which is up to no good. With the exception of the [George] Clooney character, everyone is corrupt, including, of course, the CIA. The agency not only sets up one of its own, Clooney, but it assassinates a perfectly nice Middle Eastern potentate to ensure that his oil remains in friendly hands. This sort of thing is distinctly against the law, a true career-ender at the CIA and elsewhere, but never mind. A movie does not have to stick to the facts.”

What distinguishes *Syriana* from the vast majority of recent American studio productions is precisely its effort to “stick to the facts,” the harsh truth about US machinations in the Middle East, its ruthless and criminal effort to gain dominance over global oil reserves.

Cohen sees things otherwise. Incredibly, he writes, “The Iraq war is not the product of oil avarice, or CIA evil, but of a surfeit of altruism, a naive compulsion to do good. That entire collection of neo- and retro-conservatives—George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and particularly Paul Wolfowitz—made war not for oil or for empire but to end the horror of Saddam Hussein and, yes, reorder the Middle East.”

Yes, this crowd practically brims with altruism—the empty and sadistic Bush; the unsmiling state thug Cheney; Rumsfeld, a lifelong cog in the war machine; the neo-conservative conspirator Wolfowitz. “A naive compulsion to do good?” One shudders. The present administration in Washington, which came to power through the hijacking of

a national election, brought with it the morals of Enron and WorldCom. It embodies the ascendancy of the political underworld to the highest positions of power. What is Cohen talking about?

Elsewhere in his column Cohen condemns “old-left bromides about Big Oil, Big Business, Big Government and the inherent evil of George Bush,” and the left-wing “porridge of inanities about oil or empire or Halliburton.”

Numerous reports indicate that not only did “Big Oil” intend to benefit from the invasion of Iraq, it may well have participated in planning the operation. As for Halliburton and the other well-connected military contractors, a watchdog group headed by former World Bank officials warned earlier this year that “Iraq will become the biggest corruption scandal in history.” Truly, the war in Iraq has let loose a pack of thieves perhaps unlike any other military operation in history.

What is one to say about Cohen? The style is the man. The sloppiness, crudity and essential emptiness of his outlook emerges in his column. Nowhere does he prove any of his contentions. He makes bald assertions and feels confident that no one will call him to account.

That the US invaded Iraq in pursuit of its geopolitical interests is something that masses of people throughout the world take for granted. Despite Cohen and his associates in the media, a great many people in the US also understand this. They did so even before the tragic day the war was launched in March 2003. Millions had marched only a few weeks before under banners that proclaimed “No Blood for Oil” and similar slogans.

A defining moment in Cohen’s career came in February 2003, when he fully signed onto the war drive against Iraq after Secretary of State Colin Powell’s speech at the United Nations detailing alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and ties to terrorism. One of the purposes of Powell’s appearance was to influence US public opinion, bitterly divided over the war. The ‘moderate’ and ‘rational’ secretary of state was called upon to provide a moral and political *casus belli*.

Cohen claimed at the time, in a *Washington Post* column that the “evidence he [Powell] presented to the United Nations—some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail—had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn’t accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them. Only a fool—or possibly a Frenchman—could conclude otherwise.”

Cohen concluded, “If anyone had any doubt, Powell proved that it [Iraq] has defied international law—not to mention international norms concerning human rights—and virtually dared the United Nations to put up or shut up. There is no other hand. There is no choice.”

How eager Cohen was to reach this conclusion! As the *World Socialist Web Site* remarked in February 2003, he must have begun composing his “I have seen the light about Iraq” piece before Powell had finished speaking.

The secretary of state’s allegations, none of which were substantiated at the time, have all proven false. To be blunt, they were a pack of lies, designed to justify in advance an illegal war of aggression against a virtually defenseless country. Nearly three years later, the disastrous consequences of the invasion are clear for those who have eyes to see them: tens of thousands of Iraqis and thousands of Americans dead, a country’s infrastructure destroyed, cities razed, ethnic tensions swollen to the point of civil war. No democracy, no peace, no justice—simply the inevitable catastrophe inflicted by the reckless, imperial policies of a ruling elite that has lost its head. Bush administration altruism has made its presence felt in the form of mass abuse and torture, death squads and horrific clouds of white phosphorus.

In his December 13 column, Cohen writes: “They [Bush administration officials] were inept. They were duplicitous. They were awesomely incompetent, and, in the case of Bush, they were monumentally ignorant and incurious, but they did not give a damn for oil or empire. This is why so many liberals, myself included, originally supported the war. It engaged us emotionally. It seemed... well, right—a just cause.”

Millions saw through the Bush administration’s claims about Saddam Hussein’s supposed stockpile of weapons of mass destruction. Hans Blix of the UN weapons inspections unit refuted Washington’s claims, as did Mohamed ElBaradei of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Even the French and German governments expressed skepticism.

Only a political scoundrel could write as Cohen does. If he was emotionally “engaged” by the administration’s falsifications, it was because he yearned to be. His history, as someone who long ago made his peace with the American establishment, his privileged social position, his political corruption had taken him nine-tenths of the way, or more.

Powell’s performance at the UN simply provided the occasion—or pretext—for his total conversion, as it did for a number of his colleagues.

Cohen’s deplorable role in the war drive ought to disqualify him from commenting on world affairs. If truthfulness and insight were job qualifications in the upper echelons of the US media, he would not occupy such a post.

But Cohen is still with us, concealing, apologizing, attempting to lull his readers to sleep, in his peculiarly unpleasant and half-jocular style.

The *Washington Post* columnist provides a glimpse into the mentality of an entire layer of Democratic Party liberals or ex-liberals. What does Cohen know? What does he read?

His column indicates no effort to reflect on events. His articles are little more than compendia of half-baked impressions, what he takes to be ‘common sense’ reactions to this or that development. He tacks to the left or the right as need be, occasionally criticizing the White House in ‘sharp’ language, reserving his most cynical barbs, however, for those like Gaghan (and Michael Moore, whose *Fahrenheit 9/11* Cohen vehemently attacked in 2004), who dare to lift the lid on the dirty secrets of US policy.

Whatever Cohen’s subject matter, the essential guidelines remain the same: nothing truly probing, nothing that will bring him into a conflict with the powers that be, nothing that will encourage complex thought. It is fitting that he finds the plot of *Syriana* impossible to follow: “Most reviewers have called it complicated, often using the term as a compliment. I can tell you from firsthand experience that you will never know what’s going on.”

Anyone who knows and feels something important about the world will have no difficulty in apprehending the film’s trajectory and theme. Cohen’s comment is simply one more in a long line of exercises in and incitements to philistinism.

Above all, one feels in Cohen a lack of seriousness. Everything, except perhaps his career and prestige, is a big joke. He speaks for a substantial section of the Democratic Party. And this is why the Republicans—who are at least resolute in their political depravity—will continue to eat these people for breakfast.



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