

Following his attack on satirist Stephen Colbert

Columnist Richard Cohen denounces his critics

David Walsh
11 May 2006

Columnist Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* took strong exception to comic Stephen Colbert's ironic assault on George W. Bush and the media at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner April 29. In a May 4 piece Cohen termed Colbert's satirical and biting monologue "rude" and "insulting." The columnist went farther, declaring that Colbert "was a bully" toward Bush, seated only a few feet away during the 24-minute routine.

In the course of his monologue, Colbert mockingly praised the media for its subservience to the administration: "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." He further suggested the assembled journalists ought to "[w]rite that novel you've got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know—fiction!"

Colbert's comments struck a chord with the public not only because they were aimed at Bush, but because of the scorn he expressed for the American journalistic community, which has failed utterly to take a critical attitude toward the administration and hold it accountable for its lies and criminal actions. Colbert was speaking directly to Cohen, among others. The latter's taking offense thus hardly comes as a surprise.

The matter would have ended there, with one more miserable performance by Cohen, but for the public response to his column and his own hysterical reaction. Cohen revealed in a May 9 column that his piece on Colbert had elicited an angry outpouring: "Within a day, I got more than 2,000 e-mails. A day later, I got 1,000 more. By the fourth day, the number had reached 3,499... Most... were in what we shall call disagreement. Fine. I said the man wasn't funny and not funny has a bullying quality to it; others (including some of my friends) said he was funny. But because I held such a view, my attentive critics were convinced I had a political agenda. I was—as was most of the press, I found out—George W. Bush's lap dog. If this is the case, Bush had better check his lap."

We will have more to say below about Cohen's record, but, in any case, he continued: "It seemed that most of my correspondents had been egged on to write me by various blogs. In response, they smartly assembled into a digital lynch mob and went roaring after me. If I did not like Colbert, I must like Bush. If I write for The Post, I must be a mainstream media warmonger. If I was over a certain age—which I am—I am simply out of it, wherever 'it' may be. All in all, I was—I am, and I guess I remain—the worthy object of ignorant, false and downright idiotic vituperation."

There are various unsavory strands to unravel here. One of the striking features of Cohen's response is his extreme sensitivity (and he is hardly alone in the mass media in this regard) to the Internet and its potentially disruptive power. Cohen and his ilk, including network television

broadcasters, no longer have the same privileged position as they once did, lording it over a controlled and captive market.

According to the findings of a recent survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, by the end of 2005 some 50 million Americans got news online on a typical day, a sizable increase since 2002. The study further suggests that for "a group of 'high-powered' online users... the internet is their primary news source on the average day. Within this group—which makes up 40 percent of home high-speed internet users in the United States—71 percent go online for news on the average day, while 59 percent get news from local TV. Just over half get news from national TV and radio on the typical day and about 40 percent turn to local papers." And "the impact of online news is greatest for American adults under the age of 36 with a high-speed internet connection at home."

Cohen continues to pontificate as before, but his readers have other news sources to consult and are less likely to accept his pronouncements. In the case of the Colbert monologue, part of the anger directed toward Cohen and others stems from the fact that if matters had been left to the mainstream media, the satirist's performance would never even have seen the light of day! The *New York Times* neglected to mention Colbert's name in its account of the correspondents' dinner (although he was the featured performer) and the *Washington Post*, Cohen's own paper, effectively buried his commentary in the middle of its story, leaving out all the most pointed barbs.

Thanks to the Internet, however, Colbert's attack on the politicians and media became known. On May 1, *YouTube.com* reported that the Colbert performance had been viewed 2.7 million times on its web site in less than 48 hours.

As in his previous comment, in the May 9 column Cohen stands the relationship of forces on its head. The comic was a "bully," according to the columnist, for exposing the president of the United States, the holder of the most powerful political office on earth, as an intellectual and moral cipher. Bush is responsible, along with others in his administration, for massive death and destruction in Iraq, but Colbert, for lambasting him, was... "rude" and "insulting."

Bush was no doubt discomfited by the episode. To rudeness, Cohen would counterpose sycophancy. Colbert, to his credit, rose to the occasion April 29. He gave partial voice to the contempt and rage felt by millions.

These sentiments find no outlet in any official channel in the US. Whether Colbert was "funny" or not is entirely beside the point. His satire contained sharp insights into the character of the Bush administration that are never heard in the US media. In short, he had Bush's number. He told basic truths about this government that the media refuses to tell, and this infuriates the pundits.

Cohen signed on, despite quibbles and reservations, to the invasion of

Iraq, and he will sign on, one way or another, to future bloody enterprises. He sides with the most violent, predatory and reckless social elements on earth. But those who oppose Bush and the Iraq war constitute “a digital lynch mob.”

The *Post* columnist objects strenuously to being labeled a “mainstream media warmonger.” As the saying goes, if the shoe fits...

Cohen’s nervous and abusive attack on his readers is bound up with a concern over the growing radicalization in the US and the threat it represents to his own insulated and comfortable position. So he writes: “The hatred is back. I know it’s only words now appearing on my computer screen, but the words are so angry, so roiled with rage, that they are the functional equivalent of rocks once so furiously hurled during antiwar demonstrations. I can appreciate some of it. Institution after institution failed America—the presidency, Congress and the press. They all endorsed a war to rid Iraq of what it did not have.”

These comments are astonishing. The columnist hands out his banal opinions twice a week, says whatever he pleases, yet when his pronouncements evoke an angry response, it turns out he has a glass chin.

Obviously stunned by the angry response to his attack on Colbert and his sniveling defense of Bush, he rants that his critics are a “mob.” But why was he so out of touch?

When word got out about Colbert’s appearance, when it was learned that someone had finally spoken truths that so many feel, millions responded. Cohen, on the other hand, was taken entirely by surprise.

He had, however, no interest in investigating the sources or significance of the response to his anti-Colbert column. Instead, he launched a bitter diatribe, hinting at a “vast left-wing conspiracy” against him. In its own way, this little episode reveals the immense social and political chasm that has opened up in America, with the Cohens ranged on the side of wealth and power.

In any event, the “they” in the last sentence cited above is a particularly nice touch. This is a group from which Cohen seems interested in distancing himself.

Elementary honesty would dictate the pronoun “we.” Cohen has no reason to be modest. He can claim at least a little credit for the present disastrous situation in Iraq.

In February 2003, after US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s appearance at the UN, which was a compendium of false or misleading allegations about the Iraqi regime and its purported stockpile of weapons of mass destruction and links to Islamic terrorism, Cohen declared himself thoroughly convinced. He wrote “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.”

The secretary of state’s presentation was, in fact, shabby, unconvincing and entirely driven by the interests of American imperialism. Only days later it was effectively rebutted by the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency in his appearance before the UN.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, for one, had no difficulty in laying bare the lying character of Powell’s arguments at the first possible opportunity, based on readily available information, and exposing the media converts, including Richard Cohen, a few days later.

Cohen became a propagandist for an illegal, aggressive war against a country that represented no threat to the US. While wide layers of the world’s population grasped that the impending war against Iraq was bound up with the pursuit of American geopolitical interests, particularly the securing of energy supplies, Cohen firmly denied that the invasion had anything to do with oil.

He solidarized himself with Richard Perle, at the time one of the more sinister figures in the Bush administration, when the latter denounced as “an out-and-out lie” the claim made by Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) that “oil represents the strongest incentive” for the Bush administration’s

policy. In a February 25, 2003 column, Cohen called Perle’s comment “refreshing,” and asserted that “many cases have been made [for war]—some persuasive, some not. Some were made by George Bush, some by Tony Blair, some by Republicans and some by Democrats. If you don’t impose a deadline for the war, then the case for it was even made by the UN Security Council’s Resolution 1441, endorsed, as it happens, by France. I don’t think France, not to mention Syria, would have voted to secure Iraq’s oil for America’s energy companies.”

Cohen complained in the same piece that the “looming war has already become deeply and biliously ideological. By that I mean that the extremes on both sides—but particularly the war’s opponents—no longer feel compelled to prove a case or stick to the facts.”

On March 11, 2003, in a memorable column headlined “When Peace Is No Better Than War,” Cohen wrote: “There ought to be an understanding that while war is bad—very, very bad—sometimes peace is no better, especially if all it does is postpone a worse war. That is what would happen if the United States now pulled back, leaving Saddam Hussein in power and our troops sweating in the desert, their morale and their strength dissipating.

“What would happen then? Ultimately, Hussein would wait us out. This is what he has been doing since the Persian Gulf War in 1991, when he began this game of hide-and-seek with his weapons of mass destruction. If, at the moment, he does not have nuclear weapons, it’s not for lack of trying. He had such a program once and he will have one again—just as soon as the world loses interest and the pressure on him is relaxed.”

Cohen presented no proof whatsoever for these allegations, which were nothing more than the claims of the Bush administration translated into the language of a liberal cynic. He then raised the specter of the Holocaust and the fact that in 1939-41 the US “was at peace, faced with no imminent threat from Germany. It took the irrational attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan to get us into the war. Had Japan not struck, God only knows what might have happened.

“I do not equate Iraq with Nazi Germany. The threat is not the same. But what is the same is that once again we are faced with a beast and the challenge to do something about him. The world has repeatedly ordered Hussein to disarm. He has not done so. The world cannot now simply turn away or selfishly demand that America keep an army on his borders to be used, really, only when France says so.”

This is absolutely filthy stuff, intended to pollute the political atmosphere and smear and intimidate opponents of an unprovoked, colonial-style war by comparing them with appeasers of Hitlerite fascism.

He returned to the theme in a column published March 20 (“Evil Isn’t a Dream”), the day of the US invasion, observing, “How could I, a supposed liberal, support the war in Iraq? I have several reasons, but the most important has to do with a recurring dream I used to have. In it, I am entering Auschwitz.”

Later in the same column: “I don’t know—and I somehow doubt—that George W. Bush spends much time ruminating on the Holocaust and pairing it with what happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I do think, though, that he thinks about evil. He does so, we are told, in religious terms, and in that he is different from me. But we both come out in the same place: Evil must be confronted. Since Hiroshima, there is little room to maneuver. Bad guys can do an awful lot of damage.”

In the end, Cohen, Bush and the entire American ruling elite came out “in the same place,” and the consequences have been horrific.

Since Cohen chooses to invoke the Holocaust, it might be appropriate to take note of the recent death, at the age of 92, of Drexel Sprecher, a member of the prosecution team at the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war crimes. In its obituary, the *New York Times* noted that Sprecher had presented the case against Hans Fritzsche, a deputy to the propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels. Sprecher contended that Fritzsche had incited the German population by broadcasting lies on the radio.

“The propagandists who lent themselves to this evil mission of instigation and incitement are more guilty than the credulous and callous minions who headed firing squads or operated the gas chambers,” he said.

These are words that Mr. Cohen might ponder.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact