

JULY 25

Applauding while Lebanon burns

Syndicated columnist Richard Cohen declared in the Washington Post on July 25 that an-eye-for-an-eye would be a hopelessly wimpy policy for the Israeli government. "Anyone who knows anything about the Middle East knows that proportionality is madness," he wrote.

"For Israel, a small country within reach, as we are finding out, of a missile launched from any enemy's back yard, proportionality is not only inapplicable, it is suicide. The last thing it needs is a war of attrition. It is not good enough to take out this or that missile battery. It is necessary to reestablish deterrence: You slap me, I will punch out your lights."

Cohen likes to sit in front of a computer and use flip phrases like "punch out your lights" as euphemisms for burning human flesh and bones with high-tech weapons, courtesy of American taxpayers.

In mid-November 1998, when President Clinton canceled plans for air attacks on Iraq after Saddam Hussein promised full cooperation with U.N. weapons inspectors, Cohen wrote: "Something is out of balance here. The Clinton administration waited too long to act. It needed to punch out Iraq's lights, and it did not do so."

The resort to euphemism tells us a lot. So does Cohen's track record of sweeping statements on behalf of his zeal for military actions funded by the U.S. Treasury.

On February 6, 2003, the Washington Post published Richard Cohen's judgment the morning after Colin Powell made his televised presentation to the U.N. Security Council. "The evidence he 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," Cohen wrote. "Only a fool – or possibly a Frenchman – could conclude otherwise."

Cohen's moral certainties are on a par with his technical ones. While he condemns rockets fired into Israel, he expresses pleasure about missiles fired by the Israeli government. That the death toll of civilians is far higher from Israel's weaponry does not appear to bother him. On the contrary, he seems glad about the killing spree by the Israeli military.

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In a column with bigoted overtones ("Israel is, as I have often said, unfortunately located, gentrifying a pretty bad neighborhood"), Cohen's eagerness to support additional large-scale bombing by Israel is thematic. Consider this passage: "Hezbollah, with the aid of Iran and Syria, has shown that it is no longer necessary to send a dazed suicide bomber over the border – all that is needed is the requisite amount of thrust and a warhead. That being the case, it's either stupid or mean for anyone to call for proportionality. The only way to ensure that babies don't die in their cribs and old people in the streets is to make the Lebanese or the Palestinians understand that if they, no matter how reluctantly, host those rockets, they will pay a very, very steep price."

Such phrasing is classic evasion by keyboard cheerleaders for war: "The" Lebanese. "The" Palestinians. "They will pay a very, very steep price." Meanwhile, in the real world, the vast majority of the victims of the Israeli onslaught are civilians being subjected to collective punishment.

Cohen – like so many others in the American punditocracy – depicts the death of an Israeli civilian as far more tragic and important than the death of an Arab civilian.

There's something really sick about such righteous support for civilian death and destruction.

Osama bin Laden, meet Richard Cohen.

Richard, meet Osama.

Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," was published in paperback this summer. For information, go to: www.normansolomon.com