

OCTOBER 22

25 years after Reagan, media at huge crossroad

By a twist of political fate, the Oct. 28 deadline for special counsel Patrick Fitzgerald to take action on the Plamegate matter is exactly 25 years after the only debate of the presidential race between Ronald Reagan and incumbent Jimmy Carter. How the major media outlets choose to handle the current explosive scandal in the months ahead will have enormous impacts on the trajectory of American politics.

A quarter of a century ago, conservative Republicans captured the White House. Today, a more extreme incarnation of the GOP's right wing has a firm grip on the executive branch. None of it would have been possible without a largely deferential press corps.

Among other things, Reagan's victory over Carter was a media triumph of style in the service of far-right agendas. When their only debate occurred on Oct. 28, 1980, a week before the election, Carter looked rigid and defensive while Reagan seemed at ease, making impact with zingers like "There you go again." More than ever, one-liners dazzled the press corps.

For the next eight years, a "Teflon presidency" had the news media making excuses for the nation's chief executive, who often got his facts wrong while substituting folksy exclamations for documented assertions. The Democratic Party's majorities on Capitol Hill rarely challenged Reagan, and the Washington press corps used the passivity of the Democrats to justify its own. As Walter Karp wrote in Harper's magazine a few months after Reagan left office, "the private story behind every major non-story during the Reagan administration was the Democrats' tacit alliance with Reagan."

That tacit alliance included going easy on Reagan and his vice-president-turned-successor, George H.W. Bush – despite the Iran-Contra scandal that exposed their roles in the illegal funneling of aid to the Nicaraguan Contras, a CIA-backed army that intentionally killed civilians in Nicaragua while trying to implement Washington's goal of overthrowing the Sandinista government.

"For eight years," Karp wrote in mid-1989, "the Democratic opposition had shielded

MEDIABEAT 2005 | NORMAN SOLOMON

from the public a feckless, lawless president with an appalling appetite for private power. That was the story of the Reagan years, and Washington journalists evidently knew it. Yet they never turned the collusive politics of the Democratic Party into news.”

Today, words like “feckless” and “lawless” seem like understatements when applied to the current president. A pattern of mendacity, callousness and appalling priorities has brought deadly consequences from Baghdad to New Orleans. The administration appears to be nearly drowning in scandals. Yet the news media – again with notable assists from Democratic leaders in Congress – are doing much to keep the Bush regime afloat.

Predictably, the Oct. 15 referendum on a constitution in Iraq provided the Bush administration with a new opportunity to roll out a retooled line of propaganda vehicles. A manipulative process, massaged under the duress of occupation, yielded a “yes” vote among Iraqis who chose to participate. Seen through a narrow lens – keeping the carnage and intimidation out of the frame – the election was a victory for democracy. Seen more broadly, it was a travesty.

Like two decades ago, the absence of tough Democratic leadership on Capitol Hill – combined with an overly respectful press – enables the White House to retain extensive political leverage. While the day of reckoning in human terms is every day in Iraq, the political day of reckoning on Iraq policy has yet to come in Washington. And at the rate things are going, many more years will pass before the need for withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq becomes incontrovertible in American media and politics.

Part of the Reagan legacy is the Washington press corps’ refusal to ask tough questions with even tougher follow-ups. Although the polls say that President Bush and his Iraq policies are very unpopular, Democrats in Congress and reporters are still hanging back. Their polemical statements and probing stories are the political and journalistic equivalents of slapping the wrist rather than going for the jugular.

Nothing is more dangerous than a cornered wild beast. And if the day comes that its political survival appears to be at stake, the Bush administration will counterattack with extreme ferocity. Judging from the past, there are solid reasons to doubt that the press corps – and leaders of the overly loyal opposition – are inclined to pursue key issues of White House deception to the point that the administration will be truly backed into a corner. As usual, the tasks of demanding truth and affecting the course of history for the better will fall to independent journalists and grassroots activists.

Norman Solomon is the author of the new book “War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.” For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com