

When Freedom of Expression Becomes a Weapon

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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Most of us are now well aware of the caricatures of the prophet Mohammad, solicited by and published last September in the right-wing Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten. This week several publications resurrected those controversial images of Mohammad as a bomb-turbaned terrorist and another where he refuses suicide bombers entry into Heaven as "We've run out of Virgins." Then our news sources informed us that due solely to these images "outrage sweeps across the Muslim world." Such coverage has elicited miles of text and a Babel of blather denouncing those who would dare threaten OUR freedom of speech because it offends THEIR "backward" beliefs.

Like children following the Pied-Piper, many of us now lock-step behind the tune "Freedom of Expression," deaf to the fact that there was precious little of the "RAGE, FURORE, VIOLENCE, DEATH THREATS" shouting from the headlines of mainstream news sources during the first two days of those stories. Given the virtual real-world absence of actual expressions of outrage, the mainstream media's handling of this story plays like propaganda aimed at deepening the divide between "Us and Them."

On Thursday the largest number of protesters, in a world of over one-billion Muslims, was "around 300" in Pakistan. As of noon Friday, the only reported demonstration attributed to these cartoons consisted of "about 300" Indonesians, which, somehow, Reuters viewed as meriting the headline "Uproar over Images of Mohammad Spreads across Asia." Now, self-righteous and xenophobic fires fanned by such hyperbolic headlines, the fires have begun in earnest as people of the East and West glower at the imagined Other shrieking, "How could they!"

The current coverage of this act of "freedom of expression" and the Muslim response is further demoralizing and undermining the anti-war movement as oil-rich Iran gets hauled towards the Security Council, Bush uses the State of the Union Address to shore up waning support for the "War on Terror" and Rumsfeld calls upon the world to unite as, "a war has been declared on all of our nations" by "Islamic militants" intent on creating "a global extremist empire."

Now come on, Osama bin Laden is so far off the map he cannot be found. And, as for Iran, well yes, their smiley President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad does sound terribly threatening in the press coverage he's getting; but then, he's been elected by a nation who feels terribly threatened thanks to the gusher of blood and misery unleashed in neighbouring Iraq and Afghanistan ever since Bush-n-Company came sniffing around for oil, the geo-political leverage it insures and an ongoing excuse to keep tax-payers funding their filthy rich defence contractor and clean-up-the-mess we-made pals.

Moreover, this hyped-up coverage serves to distract (if not recruit) freedom of expression advocates from their struggle with the perceived enemy within—i.e., Western governments intent on using the “War on Terror” as a pretext for spying on and incarcerating citizens of foreign countries as well as their own, and, it may also result in diverting attention from government attempts to monitor and limit freedom of speech as well as from the numerous scandals besetting the Bush Administration.

Well, back to those cartoons...and the coverage we’re getting: By focusing on isolated expressions of anger and by describing these instances as pandemic, the media is force-feeding its viewers with the Neo-Con’s “Clash of Civilizations” thesis and thereby spreading its nefarious “WE—the free, democratic, good, mature and civilized” against “THEM—the freedom-hating, despotic, evil, childlike and barbaric” world-view.

When an entire people are subsumed into this thesis of irreconcilable difference, alarm bells should thunder. One commentator on a British TV news report went so far as to describe Islam as a “virus that requires a cure.” As for the Yahoo Message Boards, a cacophony arose from the featured articles, many calling for nuking the lands of Islam into a “sea of glass” and applying the “Final Solution” to Arabs in the US and Europe. What we are witnessing is a further marginalization of the marginalized, an increased bullying of the bullied.

According to Islam, the crafting of images of Mohammad is the height of blasphemy. The way it was done, repeated and then celebrated is akin to incinerating Holy-of-Holies in public while dancing around the bonfires jeering and threatening Jews. And, who, with open eyes and ears, has not heard an echo of the Nazi’s assessment that Jews behave “like a nation within a nation;” but; now; it comes from our media, our politicians, our family and friends, when they refer to the Islamic problem.

As for those leaders of Muslim nations who have condemned these caricatures, what’s the big deal? They must state, when compelled, that these images are offensive to Muslims. Our own leaders are often quick to decry art and statements offending Christian and Jewish sensibilities—e.g., Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ” and the recent imprisonment of David Irving for Holocaust denial.

Most Middle Eastern rulers rise by force and/or maintain their regime through force—the source of which is largely supplied by the arms and military training industries of the West. Several Arab political analysts have interpreted the condemnation expressed by the region’s politicians as having much to do with their attempt to keep power. Popular anger has been focused on the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan; but, with these cartoons, regional leaders have a paper-tiger to publicly stab, and thereby show solidarity with their people without risking the ire of their foreign power-base.

What is cause for real outrage is how the Western media also appears enthusiastic about making a storm-in-a-tea-cup of the comprehensible reaction by a small number of Muslims. Doing so, given the human catastrophe visited upon Iraq by the self-proclaimed “civilized world” and the subsequent anguish and humiliation experienced by Muslims, will likely exacerbate this situation, as the past 24-hours is making worrisomely evident.

Our “free-press” is currently offering neither context nor analysis when addressing Muslim reactions to these caricatures. The coverage of what had been tiny isolated protests and threats of violence has been anything but responsible. As such, these reports serve only to stoke the flames of hatred while keeping us in the dark. Our “free-press” is selling-out its

stated mission, and its public, most cheaply.

The context is a long history of invasion, occupation, careless killing, intensive pillaging, oppression, humiliation and the subsequent radicalization of many people in the Middle East. Presenting the public outcry of a few hundred Muslims as indicative of a billion people spread over dozens of nations only deepens an already profound sense of divide between "Us and Them." To do so is not merely sensationalist and irresponsible; it's akin to a crime against truth, justice and humanity.

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