

CARTOON FATWAS

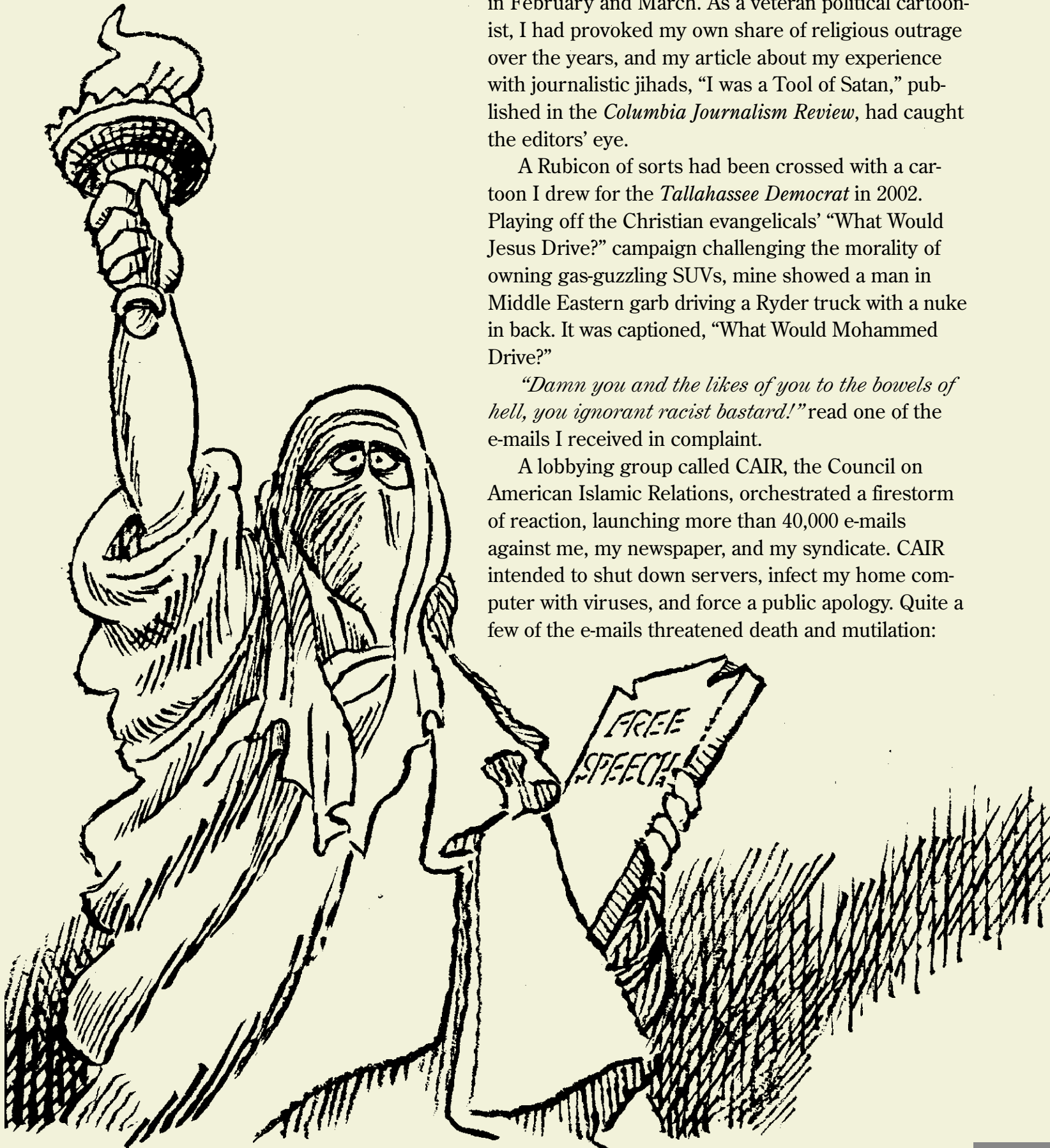
by Doug Marlette

Last December, before the rest of the world had learned about a new improvised explosive device known as the “Danish cartoons,” the Copenhagen newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* contacted me for an interview. It had published the Mohammed cartoons a few months earlier and hysteria was building, but had not yet sparked the riots and shootings that were to follow in February and March. As a veteran political cartoonist, I had provoked my own share of religious outrage over the years, and my article about my experience with journalistic jihads, “I was a Tool of Satan,” published in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, had caught the editors’ eye.

A Rubicon of sorts had been crossed with a cartoon I drew for the *Tallahassee Democrat* in 2002. Playing off the Christian evangelicals’ “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign challenging the morality of owning gas-guzzling SUVs, mine showed a man in Middle Eastern garb driving a Ryder truck with a nuke in back. It was captioned, “What Would Mohammed Drive?”

“*Damn you and the likes of you to the bowels of hell, you ignorant racist bastard!*” read one of the e-mails I received in complaint.

A lobbying group called CAIR, the Council on American Islamic Relations, orchestrated a firestorm of reaction, launching more than 40,000 e-mails against me, my newspaper, and my syndicate. CAIR intended to shut down servers, infect my home computer with viruses, and force a public apology. Quite a few of the e-mails threatened death and mutilation:



"What you did, Mr. Dog, will cost you your life. Soon you will join the dogs...hahaha...in hell."

"Just wait...we will see you in hell with all Jews."

The controversy around this cartoon became pundit fodder in newspaper editorials, columns, Web logs, talk radio, and CNN. I was even called out on the front page of the Saudi publication *Arab News* by the Secretary General of the Muslim World League. Although my newspaper's editor had wavered after the first e-mail onslaught, barring the drawing from the print edition after it ran on the Web site, I was allowed to respond in a published editorial defending the cartoon, titled, "With All Due Respect an Apology Is Not in Order."

In my vast experience upsetting people with my art—including Protestant fundamentalists when I skewered Jerry Falwell, conservative Catholics when I lampooned the Pope, and Jews when I criticized Israel—my answer to those demanding apologies has always gone something like this: In this country, we do not apologize for our opinions. Free speech is the linchpin of our republic. All other freedoms flow from it. Granted, there is nothing "fair" about cartoons. They are hard to defend with logic. But this is why we have a First Amendment—so that we have the freedom to take positions that may not be pleasing to everyone, especially to those in power.

The *Jyllands-Posten* editors were struck by the similarities between my "What Would Mohammed Drive?" situation and theirs, and thought my experience handling it might be instructive for their readers as well as for their cartoonists (50,000 Danish kroner each were offered for their executions by a Pakistani political party with a Danish affiliation). The editors first wanted to know my reaction to being attacked. Had I panicked?

The culture of death advanced by Islamic extremists who sanction suicide bombers and issue fatwas on people who draw funny pictures, was certainly of a different fanatical magnitude than the protests of the home-grown religious true believers I was used to. But the truth is, I don't really worry about who I might offend when I set out to create a cartoon. If I did, I might never draw anything.

The act of creation does not begin with a shudder of inhibition. I don't think about who it might upset but only whether the drawing or idea is effective and says what I want to say in a lively and interesting way. When I drew a cartoon in 1988 of Israeli soldiers bursting into a garret and discovering Anne Frank, I knew I was treading upon the sacred ground of historic victimhood, the Holocaust. Still, when the inspiration hit, I was more excited about the stark directness of the concept, the ironic effectiveness of the moral juxtaposition. Naturally some Jews were offended. Then came the inevitable charges of anti-Semitism. But I didn't fear for my life from the people who gave us the Ten Commandments.

Likewise, I never considered whether my Mohammed cartoon would be offensive to Muslims. Nor had I given any particular thought to the ban on depictions of the Prophet because I did not have Mohammed in mind when I drew the picture of the truck driver; he was simply a generic headdress-wearing Arab. Similarly, I could have drawn a cartoon of "What Would Jesus Drive?" with some equally stereotypical Pentecostal foot-washer driving a hybrid. I had actually drawn the Prophet years before, sitting in paradise along with Buddha and Jesus, each of them lamenting the horrors committed in their names, so I had researched what Mohammed was supposed to look like, and it wasn't like the kaffia-clad guy I had drawn driving the truck. But as often is the case with cartoons, the artist's intent is lost on those offended. Cartoon images should not be taken literally.

The Danish drawings were mild and even apolitical compared with my "What Would Mohammed Drive?" cartoon, and so what struck me as almost as fishy as the manufactured backlash in the Middle East (radical imams had distributed, along with the Danish drawings, images of dogs mounting prostrate Muslims and pig-snouted Prophets, the better to get a rise out of street mobs) was the bad thinking here at home. The harrumphing of U.S. print and network commentators over the offense done to Muslim feelings mirrored the pandering of politicians like the State Department's Karen Hughes, who called the cartoons blasphemous and compared them to racial slurs. My sense was

that the reason the American media abandoned their counterparts in Europe had little to do with the moral rationales they offered for their refusal to reprint the images. I think they were simply scared.

Don't get me wrong. I understand the impulse to go into hiding. Even though the attacks upon me were of a cyber-offensive nature, I certainly felt that *frisson* of fear over death threats from people so unfettered by the restraints of civil discourse. Years of experience with angry reader reaction have taught me that often the frustration and rage over drawn opinion tend to be tempered if not defused when a human being is discovered behind the pen. The impersonality of the Internet further emboldens the resentful and powerless. Yet the ones I worry about more are those who don't write. My fear is less for myself than for my family that they might suffer for my freedom of expression.

As I told *Jyllands-Posten*, I did not show the e-mail threats to my family, but they knew something scary was going on. Although I doubt I was ever under the kind of overt threat that the Danish artists were, I couldn't imagine what I would do under those circumstances and whatever the artists did in response, stand up or shrink away, seemed reasonable to me.

I wholeheartedly support the Danish cartoons. I think that the Danes' challenge to the prohibition against depicting Mohammed is a sign of societal health and, I believe, a deeper form of respect for that religion. The fact that we are now having this discussion and debate is a sign of hope, thanks to the Danes. It's a step in the right direction to include the Muslim minority in our great Western tradition of self-examination and critique. Otherwise, the next logical question is, if we revere religious taboos that have no place in our own culture, must we also refrain from criticizing tenets of that religion that, for example, regard women as chattel or encourage children to blow themselves up?

Those who have attacked my work, whether on the right, the left, Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim all see satirical irreverence as hostility and hate. In a democracy, scathing criticism is not necessarily hatred. Just because it's not worship, is it hate? Just because you're not an Islamophile, does that make you an Islamophobe?

Healthy skepticism, honest doubt, challenges to authority—those are the *sine qua non* of our western culture. From Socrates to Jesus to Galileo to Darwin to Freud, irreverence, the raised eyebrow, the toppled shibboleth (or monarch), is the animating spirit behind all human progress, both scientific and democratic. Our ability to tolerate charged intellectual discourse and all their attendant controversies is a measure of the health of society. We should not cringe from exercising free speech.

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"AT LAST!... THE PERFECT WESTERNER—ALREADY BEHEADED!"

Doug Marlette: "If I worried about who I might offend, I might never draw anything."

“I’M PAID TO OFFEND”

The Arab journalists in the room must have thought I was the most powerful man in America. Image after image flashed on the screen criticizing President Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, the Pope. And I was not dead. I was not even in prison. There I was, standing in front of them showing my daily cartoons and explaining why in this country I had not been arrested.

I had been invited to speak to a group of journalists from North Africa and the Middle East about American political cartooning. The journalists were visiting the University of North Carolina School of Journalism and Mass Communication in Chapel Hill as part of the

Edward R. Murrow program sponsored by the State Department. I began by explaining that for a cartoonist, insult, stereotype, slander, and insensitivity are a job description: I’m paid to offend people. Then I showed one irreverent cartoon after another. President George W. Bush rattling his empty head instead of his saber. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld wearing a T-shirt that reads “Shiite Happens.”

The State Department interpreters on hand for the conference had their work cut out for them. Hearing them doggedly translate each cartoon into Arabic, occasionally interrupted by their own giggles of recognition as the meanings dawned, then the delayed reactions of their Arab constituency, like CNN satellite transmissions from Baghdad, was a torturous test of patience for someone like me who knows that in comedy, timing is everything.

But it also brought home the cartoonists’ profound dependency upon readers’ knowledge of issues and familiarity with pop culture. Imagine explaining “Shiite Happens” to a roomful of perplexed Middle Easterners. It reminded me that the understanding of each cartoon depended upon the kind of non-official common national language that can only grow out of a free press. Something we all take for granted.

To these Muslim journalists, who are forbidden to criticize political or religious leaders in print in their own countries, the provocative images began working on their defenses like a solvent. Smiles and laughter broke the tension. If not quite warmed up, the visitors were certainly defrosted to room temperature. Finally, I showed them my own controversial Mohammed cartoons. I could feel the mood in the room turn. I was beginning to wonder, What Would Mohammed Drive A Stake Through The Heart Of? Peace Be Unto Him. The passionate exchange that ensued went on an hour after the session was scheduled to have adjourned.

“Why do you make fun of the Prophet?”

“I don’t,” I replied. “I make fun of those who murder in the name of the Prophet.”

“Is nothing taboo? Where do you draw the line?”

“I don’t think in terms of what cannot be done, but what can,” I said. “It’s hard enough to make something up from nothing without shackling yourself to anxiety over giving offense. I don’t set out to offend—offending takes no creativity. But if it results from the effectiveness of my art, I don’t mind.”

I could see that they thought my drawings were random outbursts of anarchy, like some sort of visual Tourette tics. As newcomers to our Western institutions, with no knowledge of [predecessors like] Jefferson, Madison, or Adams and without centuries of roiling debate about press



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freedom, Muslims may regard our tradition of self-critical humor as being decadent and shameful. It was difficult to get across to them that these volatile images were drawn in the context of ongoing public dialogue. They were also unfamiliar with objective criticism, the notion that one could be harsh on those with whom one fundamentally agreed. Their argument always returned to an appeal to me to be mindful of the sensitivities of others. I responded that those offended had the right to free speech as well and could voice their offense.

They wanted me to understand that to them the Prophet is holy, and I answered that to us, free speech is holy.

A Kuwaiti woman asked, “If given the choice between offering a message of love or confrontation, which do you choose?” I told her that given the choice, any of us would choose love, but the problem, as Dr. Martin Luther King articulated in his Letter from a Birmingham jail, is that sometimes love is expressed through confrontation. Marches, sit-ins, and freedom rides were a form of speech that provoked. “I see my provocative cartoons as a form of non-violent direct action.”

I pointed out that as moderate Muslims, they were faced with the same dilemma that we moderate white Southerners faced when Klansmen burned crosses and terrorized black Americans in the name of our Christ. “The good Christian people of the South allowed extremists to hijack their religion and act on their behalf.”

In the end I felt a bit awkward admonishing journalists who risk so much more to exercise freedom of speech—the freedom even to express the belief, as they did in the conference, that the murderers and beheaders who shout “Allahu Akbar” God is great, are the infidels to Islam. Compared to them, we in the American media have so little to lose, and yet only the tiniest number of mainstream newspapers—the *Philadelphia Inquirer* being the largest—had the guts to print the Danish cartoons. That capitulation—to fear, to corporate aversion to controversy—reflected the general debasement of public discourse in this country, an echo chamber of shouting heads and unhinged talk radio, with propagandists of both parties talking past each other. I felt a bit intellectually dishonest myself, implying that what passes today for free speech in this country is robust democratic debate. Yet what was going on across cultures in that room that spring Saturday in Chapel Hill was worthy of the compliment.

The session ended with genuine affection among us. One of the State Department interpreters—an Arab man—said to me, “This was fascinating. I can understand and empathize with both sides, both cultural points of view.” And for a moment I did feel that a mere cartoonist could be the most powerful man in America.

Thanks to our freedom, each of us—not just in the press but in the expanding cyber-domain of expression—can speak his mind and exercise that singular power he possesses over princes and kings, popes and potentates, his own unique voice, refusing to be bullied or intimidated into silence. The process is imperfect, the ideal unattainable, and like some Jeffersonian version of the movie “Groundhog Day,” the battle must be fought over and over again. But the First Amendment potentially deputizes each of us as a stand-in and surrogate for We the People. That is the true power of this country, and as I saw that day, it is the envy of the world. ■