

Death by Cartoon

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By Marisol Seibold (May 2006)

Introduction

It does not happen terribly often that two of my great passions in life—some more consequential than others—intersect. Even just six months ago, no such intersection would have seemed more odd than that of my love of cartoons (more specifically, animated comedy), and my concern for the survival of the West in the face of the global jihad being waged against us.

Raised from an early age on falling anvils, coyotes ordering from Acme, and bald men hunting wabbits, two admittedly more daring cartoons have accompanied roughly the entirety of my adult life, from my starting college to the present day: *South Park*, and *Family Guy*. When “Cartoon Rage” erupted in the Islamic world over the twelve [caricatures](#) published in the Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* of the Muslim prophet Muhammad, I figured that if any American television show would take on this issue, it would be one of these two. Better yet, *South Park*’s writers, taking note of the sizable audience the two shows have in common, appropriated *Family Guy* and its characteristic, *non-sequitur* flashbacks in order to allow their own show to function as the observer in a fictional adaptation of the cartoon controversy.

In the paragraphs that follow, I will discuss the successes and failures of *South Park*’s take on this controversy with regard to a few key moments in the two episodes, as well as Comedy Central’s handling of the broadcast, and its larger implications for the future.

Part I: The Episodes

“Cartoon Wars, Part I” opens with a scene of dreamy tranquility interrupted by absurd, hysterical overreaction, as the townsfolk rush late at night to a local shelter, upon hearing that *Family Guy* plans to air an image of Muhammad. Upon hearing that explanation, young Stan Marsh sums up much of the Western world’s reaction to the Danish cartoons: “So?”

In a trembling voice, Stan’s father explains: “Ever since the cartoons in Denmark, *the rules have changed*. Nobody shows the image of Muhammad anymore! [emphasis added]” This, of course, echoes Thomas Jefferson’s observation that “the natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground,” and nothing could be more true when that government is based on Islamic Sharia law.

Now, *South Park* seemed to opt for responding to the absurdity of the “cartoon rage” that caused death and property damage across the Mideast with more absurdity, as fourth-grade teacher Mrs. (formerly Mr.) Garrison attributed the rioting to sexual frustration and being surrounded by sand. (Garrison, for those unfamiliar with the show, is a raving bigot who despises every minority on the planet.) Granted, it may have been their intention to highlight the very innocence of the cartoons that caused the controversy, but one wonders if Parker and Stone were aware of what their display of anti-dhimmitude was truly up against, let alone what “dhimmitude” is.

Since the program is a comedy, after all, I hesitate to fault its creators, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, too much for overlooking the role of Islamic jurisprudence, and indeed, the precedent set by Muhammad’s own orders in fueling cartoon rage: Ibn Ishaq’s *Sirat Rasul Allah (Biography of the Prophet of Allah)* shows that Muhammad himself did not take kindly to satire, especially from unbelievers like [Asma bint Marwan](#):

When the apostle heard what she had said he said, “Who will rid me of Marwan’s daughter?” Umayr b. Adiy al-Khatmi who was with him heard him, and that very night he went to her house and killed her. In the morning he came to the apostle and told him what he had done and he [Muhammad] said, “You have helped God and His apostle, O Umayr!” When he asked if he would have to bear any evil consequences the apostle said, “Two goats won’t butt their heads about her”, so Umayr went back to his people.

However, if Parker and Stone had so desired to take on actual Islamic beliefs, ample precedent exists in the earlier episode, “In the Closet” which deals with Scientology. In this episode, a summary of what are believed to be the “advanced” teachings of the Church of Scientology appeared, accompanied by the caption: “This is what Scientologists actually believe.” This, then, is what Islam actually teaches. Ultimately, an educational opportunity was missed, which might have put a small dent in the many fantasies and half-truths bandied about in the press with respect to Islam that hamper the “War on Terror,” beginning with the strong belief in tolerance so often attributed to the religion of Muhammad.

Returning to the episodes at hand, as Cartman, who had traveled by [Big Wheel](#) from Colorado to Hollywood, spoke at greater length about his desire to have *Family*

Guy taken off the air, the *South Park* writers did not miss the opportunity to give him a few lines that ought to put the mainstream media to shame, including: "I'm going to use *fear* to get them to do what I want... It's not *like* terrorism, it *is* terrorism."

Indeed, the threat of terrorism is, itself, a form of terrorism; both the threat and the actual attack serve the same purpose: Manipulation and subjugation through fear. Thus, those who would bury their heads in the sand, as the entire United States quite literally did in "Cartoon Wars," do not achieve the slightest moral victory, but only delude themselves into thinking they have somehow prevented future violence, or that they have lessened by one iota the hatred their opponent harbors for them.

Here, I must provide the "spoiler" that, in the end, Fox does air the episode of *Family Guy* with the image of Muhammad, though all viewers saw was a black screen, with the text: "Comedy Central has refused to broadcast an image of Mohammed on their network." (Fortunately, what one would have seen has been leaked onto the internet, and can be viewed [here](#).) And, as promised in footage of Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden, brilliantly spliced into "news" breaks on the cartoon, retaliation comes.

However, echoing Iranian newspaper *Hamshahri's* call to respond to the Danish cartoons with [cartoons offensive to Westerners](#) (Israelis and Americans in particular), al Qaeda's retaliation is nothing more than a crass and poorly animated cartoon, not unlike the show's cartoon-within-a-cartoon, *Terrance & Phillip* (which, in an ironic bit of foreshadowing, caused a fictional war with Canada in *South Park's* 1999 feature film).

Honestly, the retaliatory cartoon felt somewhat anti-climactic at first, due to its controversial nature: It has been widely publicized that the cartoon involved Jesus, George W. Bush, the American flag, and bodily functions. Nevertheless, the primitive, "paper-doll" nature of the animation took much of the offense out of the scene for me, and one must consider that this cartoon was attributed to al Qaeda, who, of course, are not nice people. Beyond that, the more I thought about the cartoon and the press coverage it received, the more I was inclined to conclude that therein lay the entire point of these two episodes: Americans were offended with not one, but *three* emotionally charged images being abused, and no one died. No one rioted. No mass demonstrations called for the beheading of Parker and Stone: Why should we, as a society, lower those standards of civil behavior for anyone?

A secondary lesson lies in the observation that the fear of retaliation was far worse than the retaliation itself, after all the wasted energy of having the entire US population bury its head in sand, *rather than taking steps to prevent an attack from happening*. In the episode, some Americans blame their own for provoking an attack; feeling that the attack can thus somehow be justified, the prospect of it actually occurring becomes that much more of a foregone conclusion. As one character pointed out that burying one's head in sand was easier than fighting for the right free speech ("The sand thing sounds a lot simpler."). Is the loss of our civilization and institutions worth taking the easy, and supposedly safe way out?

Part II: The Consequences

Immediately after the airing of “Cartoon Wars, Part II,” the question arose across the Internet of whether Comedy Central truly refused to show the image of Muhammad, or if Parker and Stone were pulling their viewers’ chains, as they often do. However, Steven Spruiell, of the National Review Online’s [Media Blog](#) put that speculation to rest the following day:

I’m not sure if it’s been reported yet, but for what it’s worth, I just got off the phone with a Comedy Central spokesman... I asked him whether this truly was Comedy Central’s decision or whether this was just another gag (with South Park, you never know). He said: “They reflected it accurately. That was a Comedy Central decision.”


Just in case there was any confusion, that settles it. Comedy Central censored the image.

Naturally, many viewers emailed Comedy Central in protest, and received a form letter (the entirety of which can be found [here](#)), which stated, in part:

Comedy Central’s belief in the First Amendment has not wavered, despite our decision not to air an image of Muhammad...This decision was based solely on concern for public safety in light of recent world events.

With the power of freedom of speech and expression also comes the obligation to use that power in a responsible way. Much as we wish it weren’t the case, times have changed and, as witnessed by the intense and deadly reaction to the publication of the Danish cartoons, decisions cannot be made in a vacuum without considering what impact they may have on innocent individuals around the globe.

It was with this in mind we decided not to air the image of Muhammad, a decision similar to that made by virtually every single media outlet across the country earlier this year when they each determined that it was not prudent or in the interest of safety to reproduce the controversial Danish cartoons.

 Clearly, this played beautifully into the hands of the two “Cartoon Wars” episodes. Never mind that Comedy Central showed Muhammad without incident in 2001, in the episode “Super Best Friends” (left, credit: [South Park Scriptorium](#)). Apparently, as quoted earlier, “Ever since the cartoons in Denmark, the rules have changed.”

In a free society, the very notion that “the rules have changed” with respect to a fundamental right is a provocation to break them, which, after all, is the reason *Jyllands-Posten* published the cartoons of Muhammad in the first place.

[Wikipedia](#) summarizes: “The Muhammed cartoons [were] solicited for a specific story, about self-censorship springing out of fear of Muslim extremists, after the author of a children’s book about Muhammed had to use an anonymous illustrator.”

I doubt the brass at Comedy Central are familiar with the name of Theo Van Gogh, the Dutch director who was murdered by a Muslim juvenile-delinquent-turned-jihad-supporter. Van Gogh’s assassination occurred in response to his film, [Submission](#), which dealt with the subject of violence against women in Islam, and is perhaps the most high-profile example of violence in Europe toward artists, journalists, and politicians who dare speak of Islam in an uncomplimentary manner. It is that precedent that created the climate of fear to which *Jyllands-Posten* responded.

One should consider Comedy Central’s exercise in risk-management as a business move, rather than a matter of conscience. It is worth noting that the network cites the decision of the majority of media outlets in the US not to run the cartoons as further justification; making waves in such a manner would be bad business sense. Good business sense dictates that one only push the envelope of free speech—to which such lip service is paid in the form letter—first when it is profitable, and secondly, when no one will come after those responsible in a serious way.

Thus, one finds the mainstream American media choosing its battles for freedom of speech, among other rights, quite poorly: The cartoon controversy has shown that the buck stops when defending freedom of speech actually stands for something, and carries some risk. But we in the West have our civilized alternative to death threats and effigy burnings: We take our business elsewhere. In sufficient numbers, that decision leaves the major networks and newspaper to wonder, cluelessly, at the consumers flocking away from them as sources of information and analysis, and turning instead to websites in general, and more specifically, blogs.

Their loss is our gain.