

The Consequences of Appeasement: A Timeline of Attacks on Free Speech

The Rushdie Affair

December 1988–January 1989: Viking Penguin, the American publisher of Salman Rushdie’s book *The Satanic Verses*, receives thousands of threatening letters and several bomb threats.

February 14, 1989: Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issues a fatwah (religious edict) demanding the death of Salman Rushdie, who goes into hiding under police protection.

February 14–18, 1989:

- Viking Penguin and many bookstores receive death threats. A bomb threat leads the publisher to close its Manhattan office temporarily.
- Fearing attacks, three major North American bookstore chains—B. Dalton Booksellers, Waldenbooks and Coles Book Stores Ltd. of Canada—pull *The Satanic Verses* from the shelves of more than 2,600 stores.
- Small booksellers across North America follow suit.

February 21, 1989: President George H. W. Bush’s reaction was appeasing: “However offensive that book may be, inciting murder and offering rewards for its perpetration are deeply offensive to the norms of civilized behavior.” With that shameful statement, Bush implied that Khomeini and Rushdie were equally objectionable. Bush added a pro forma warning that America would hold Iran “accountable” should any action be taken against U.S. interests—as if the attack on the principle of freedom of speech and the incitement to murder had no bearing on our interests. Taking no action against Iran, Washington bowed in deference to a blood-lusting Islamic theocrat and sacrificed the freedom of Americans.

February–December 1989:

- Two bookstores in Berkeley, California are firebombed.
- During the first half of the year, Viking Penguin reportedly spends nearly \$3 million on security.
- In March alone, FBI registers more than seventy-five threats to bookstores; B. Dalton Bookseller received thirty in under three hours.

- Bookstore at Dulles Airport posts sign: “We do not stock *The Satanic Verses*”; another bookseller omits it from displays of top-ten best-sellers.
- One French publishing company is put under 24/7 police guard; other European publishers delay release of translations of *The Satanic Verses*
- Few British booksellers stock the book; some offer it, but under the counter.

July 1991: The Italian translator of *The Satanic Verses* is stabbed, but survives. The Japanese translator is knifed to death.

Submission (2004 film)

August 19, 2004: *Submission*, a short film directed and produced by Theo van Gogh and written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, airs on the Dutch public broadcasting network (VPRO). The film points to the Koran as a rationale for the oppression of women in Islam.

November 2, 2004: An Islamist brutally murders Theo van Gogh on an Amsterdam street. Van Gogh’s “crime,” according to a note pinned to his body, was making a critical film about Islam. The note also promised to punish other “blasphemers” involved in the film, including Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who now lives under round-the-clock security.

The Danish Cartoons Crisis

September 30, 2005: *Jyllands-Posten*, Denmark’s largest daily newspaper, publishes twelve cartoons of the prophet Muhammad.

September–December 2005: A group of imams foment opposition to *Jyllands-Posten* within Denmark, including a veiled threat of violence. They exert pressure on the Danish prime minister to demand an apology from the newspaper and seek support from Muslim regimes.

January–February 2006:

- The twelve cartoonists; Carsten Juste, editor in chief; and Flemming Rose, culture editor, at *Jyllands-Posten* receive death threats.
- A Pakistani cleric offers a bounty of \$1 million for the heads of the cartoonists.
- Attacks on Danish embassies in Syria, Iran, Pakistan, Lebanon.

- Violent protests in Afghanistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Libya, Turkey.
- Boycotts of Danish products, endorsed by several Muslim countries.
- At least two hundred deaths attributed to the protests, riots, bombings.
- Some European newspapers, including *Charlie Hebdo*, reprint one or more of the cartoons.
- No major U.S. publications reprint the cartoons.
- The U.S. State Department criticizes the publication of the cartoons as “offensive to the beliefs of Muslims.” With a perfunctory nod to free speech, the George W. Bush administration goes on to betray that principle by indicating that perhaps the cartoons were better left unpublished.

March 2006: In the United States, the April-May issue of *Free Inquiry* reprints the cartoons, but, citing safety concerns, Borders and Waldenbooks stores refuse to stock that issue of the magazine.

Aftershocks of the Cartoons Crisis

April 2006: Comedy Central refuses to broadcast an image of Muhammad in a *South Park* episode, citing “concerns for public safety.”

September 2006: A leading German opera house cancels performances of a Mozart opera, fearing reprisals; the opera includes a scene that depicts the severed head of the prophet Muhammad.

August 2007: For a Swedish exhibition on the theme of the dog in art, the artist Lars Vilks depicts Muhammad as a dog. Because of security fears, organizers of the exhibition rescind Vilks’s invitation. An Islamist group in Iraq offers \$150,000 bounty for the assassination of Vilks, who is forced to live under police protection.

February 12, 2008: Three Islamists attempt to murder the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, whose cartoon was one of the twelve originally published by *Jyllands-Posten*. Westergaard was living in hiding under police protection.

March 2008: Osama bin Laden threatens Europeans for repeatedly publishing the Danish cartoons.

June 2008: Exacting revenge for the Danish cartoons, Al Qaeda bombs Denmark’s embassy in Pakistan, killing six people.

August 2008: Random House cancels plans to release a novel about the prophet Muhammad's child bride, worried it might "incite acts of violence."

April 2010: Comedy Central receives threats regarding an episode of *South Park* featuring a character claimed to be Muhammad. The network edits the character out of the episode.

April–September 2010: Molly Norris, a cartoonist for *Seattle Weekly*, promotes an "Everybody Draw Muhammad Day" on April 20, 2010. After receiving death threats, she is forced into hiding.

January 1, 2010: Kurt Westergaard escapes another attempt on his life.

May 11, 2011: In Uppsala, Sweden, while giving a talk on freedom of speech, Lars Vilks is attacked.

November 2, 2011: In Paris, France, the offices of the magazine *Charlie Hebdo* are firebombed, following the publication of an edition "guest edited" by Muhammad.

March 1, 2013: In its jihadist recruitment magazine, *Inspire*, Al Qaeda publishes a hit list that includes: Carsten Juste, Flemming Rose, Lars Vilks, Kurt Westergaard, Molly Norris, Stéphane Charbonnier (editor of *Charlie Hebdo*), and Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

November–December 2014: Email servers at Sony Pictures Entertainment are hacked in connection with the release of the comedic film *The Interview*, which is about a plot to assassinate the leader of North Korea.

- Movie theaters are threatened with deadly attacks (the threat warned: "Remember the 11th of September 2001")
- Four national theater chains, which together operate more than 19,000 screens, drop plans to show *The Interview*.
- Citing safety concerns, Sony decides to cancel the theatrical release of *The Interview*.
- Evading the government's fundamental responsibility to protect freedom of speech, President Obama reproaches Sony for failing to stand up for itself.
- Sony reverses its decision, but few theaters agree to screen the movie amid fears of reprisals. The film is released online.

The Massacre at *Charlie Hebdo* and Its Aftershocks

January 7, 2015: In Paris two Islamist gunmen enter the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and murder twelve people. During the attack they are heard shouting, “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad” and “God is Great” in Arabic, as they call out the names of the journalists. The gunmen go on to kill a policewoman and four other people during a siege at a kosher supermarket.

January–February 2015:

- Widespread expressions of sympathy for the victims of the attack at *Charlie Hebdo*; #JeSuisCharlie, a hashtag expressing solidarity with the murdered journalists, pervades social media for days.
- On January 11, more than one million people take part in a rally in Paris to remember the victims. Some forty world leaders march in solidarity with France; President Barack Obama is conspicuous by his absence.
- Tide of sympathy recedes; editorials and columns question whether *Charlie Hebdo* brought the massacre upon itself. Calling the journalists at *Charlie Hebdo* “provocateurs,” Pope Francis noted that while the massacre was not justified, “a reaction could have been expected.”

February 14–15, 2015: In Copenhagen, Denmark, an Islamist gunman opens fire at an event upholding free speech that features Lars Vilks as a speaker. Vilks survives unscathed, but one other is killed.

March–April 2015: PEN American Center, an association of writers and editors, names *Charlie Hebdo* as the winner of the free-speech organization’s annual “Freedom of Expression Courage” award. Objecting to the award, six notable authors publicly withdraw from the upcoming PEN gala and award ceremony. More than two hundred members of PEN sign an open letter protesting the decision to honor *Charlie Hebdo*.

April 10, 2015: The cartoonist Garry Trudeau, in a talk accepting a lifetime achievement award, castigates “free speech absolutists.” He criticizes not only *Jyllands-Posten* for publishing the cartoons of Muhammad in 2005, but also *Charlie Hebdo* for “punching downward” at a “powerless, disenfranchised minority.”

May 3, 2015: In Garland, Texas, two Islamist gunmen open fire outside the Curtis Culwell Center where the “First Annual Muhammad Art Exhibit and Contest” takes place. Police kill both attackers and no innocents are killed.

May–June 2015: Many prominent voices criticize the organizer of the Muhammad art exhibit and contest, Pamela Geller, for “provoking” the Islamist attack.

July 2015: Six months after the massacre at its offices, *Charlie Hebdo* announces that the magazine will stop publishing images of Muhammad.

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Postscript: Iran faced no significant consequences from Western governments for the fatwah against Rushdie. Over the years, the bounty on Rushdie’s life has gone up, most recently in February 2016. Currently it stands at nearly \$4 million.

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Resources

The above is a selective timeline that omits a great many data points. Comprehensive accounts of the Rushdie affair, the cartoons crisis, and their aftershocks can be found in the following books, which were among the sources used in compiling the timeline:

- *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West* by Daniel Pipes (Transaction Publishers, 2003).
- *The Tyranny of Silence: How One Cartoon Ignited a Global Debate on the Future of Free Speech* by Flemming Rose (Cato Institute Press, 2014).
- *Surrender: Appeasing Islam, Sacrificing Freedom* by Bruce Bawer (Random House, 2009).