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William Creeley: Yale's cowardice erodes free speech

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BY CHOOSING to remove all depictions of the Prophet Mohammed from Brandeis Professor Jytte Klausen's book, *The Cartoons That Shook the World*, to be published by Yale University Press in early October, Yale University has betrayed academic freedom. Worse, Yale has surrendered without protest to nonexistent demands it merely imagines from those willing to kill to silence views with which they disagree.

So much for the pen being mightier than the sword.

Four years ago, in September of 2005, the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten* ran a set of 12 editorial cartoon caricatures of Mohammed. In an accompanying note, the paper's culture editor explained that the cartoons were intended to satirize the paper's belief that Danish Muslims were "insisting on special consideration" — a stance the paper regarded as "incompatible with contemporary democracy and freedom of speech, where one must be ready to put up with insults, mockery and ridicule."

Thanks to today's dynamic global media environment, as soon as outrage over the cartoons spread across the Islamic world and the ensuing riots turned violent, the controversial cartoons themselves "went viral" and were republished in newspapers across the globe. Danish embassies were torched in Iran and Syria, death threats were made against editors of newspapers publishing the cartoons, and bounties were placed on the heads of the cartoonists. When the riots finally ended, over 200 people had been killed in cartoon-related riots around the world — and millions had seen the cartoons.

Given the blood spilled, the title of Klausen's forthcoming book, *The Cartoons That Shook the World*, is unsurprising. What is surprising, however, is the fact that Yale itself remains shaken — indeed, to the point that the university has been willing to abandon its good name and engage in pre-emptive censorship.

Klausen made inclusion of the cartoons a prerequisite for publication when submitting her manuscript. Yale University Press agreed to those terms and vetted the manuscript, which met the Yale press's high standards, as it would any other. The process included a full legal review, which was completed satisfactorily, and Klausen's manuscript won the unanimous approval of the University Publications Committee.

But shamefully, Yale then subjected Klausen to a vastly different standard of review because of the

controversial subject matter of her book. Acting independently of the Yale University Press, the university broke from standard protocol and embarked on its own review, supposedly out of concern that the publication of the cartoons would provoke renewed violence.

Specifically, the university provided copies of the images contained in the work — not the work itself; just the images — to a set of individual consultants, the identities of whom the university has steadfastly refused to release. (Even Klausen has been denied access to these names without first signing a nondisclosure agreement.) Relying on the opinions of these anonymous consultants, the university decided to yank the images from the book because of what Yale Vice President and Secretary Linda Lorimer acknowledged was an unspecified, general fear of violence.

Klausen admitted to being “stunned” by the decision. She is not alone. Yale’s blatant capitulation to the most violent elements of global society has ignited its own controversy, and reaction to Yale’s cowardly censorship has been swift and unforgiving.

Despite public ridicule and pressure, Yale refuses to acknowledge the bitter irony of publishing a book about possibly the most newsworthy cartoons in history without including the cartoons themselves. Yale argues that since the cartoons are available online, there is no need to publish them again. But this is ridiculous — who’s to say that the images on the Internet will be available 5, 10, or 50 years from now?

Yale also argues that since the images can be described in words, publication is superfluous. This is even more foolish. Verbal descriptions of images necessarily contain their own interpretations of the image, but the power of images is their ability to convey different meanings to different audiences.

These mealy-mouthed excuses are shameful attempts to justify the worst kind of risk-management: the kind that sacrifices freedom for the sake of fear.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education recently joined an open letter protesting Yale’s decision, signed by eleven other national organizations, including the ACLU, the National Coalition Against Censorship, the American Association of University Professors, the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, and the Middle East Studies Association.

In the open letter, penned by the National Coalition Against Censorship’s Joan Bertin, we stated: “Giving in to the fear of violence only emboldens those who use threats to achieve their ends. This misguided action establishes a dangerous precedent that threatens academic and intellectual freedom around the world.”

By engaging in pre-emptive censorship, Yale has succumbed to fear. Those of us who value free discourse and unfettered inquiry should condemn such cowardice.

William Creeley is director of legal and public advocacy for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.