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The fear that continues to consume journalists

By Jeremy Lott

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The author of “The Tyranny of Silence” once cost me a job.

It was in 2006. I had started writing a column for the alt-weekly New York Press. Another columnist wrote about the slow roiling controversy touched off by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten’s publication of several cartoons that mocked Islam and Muhammad the year before. The Press’s editors and its owners butted heads, harshly, over whether their paper should also publish the cartoons to illustrate the story.

The suits feared a boycott, protests, or worse. They said, go ahead and run the story but leave the pictures out. The editors argued such an omission would be a “hypocritical” cop-out, and walked out in protest. There went the editors. There went my column.

It was but one infinitesimally small bit of collateral damage from Jyllands-Posten editor Flemming Rose’s decision to publish the cartoons. One almost feels guilty bringing it up now given the sheer severity of the worldwide response over the publication of a handful of cartoons in a newspaper. Except, the Press was hardly alone in its refusal to show readers what the controversy was all about.

Nat Hentoff, American journalist and long time champion of the freedom to speak freely, explains in the book’s introduction, “in the United States reactions were so intimidating that while The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and Chicago Tribune described these bristling cartoons in words, these newspapers — in the land of the First Amendment guarantee of the free press — refused to print the cartoons themselves.”

Whatever rationales the newspapers came up with for not showing the cartoons, the real fear was bloodshed. Or perhaps we should say, more bloodshed.

“The Cartoon Crisis, as it became known, spiraled into violent international uproar, as Muslims around the world erupted in protest. Danish embassies were attacked, and more than 200 deaths were attributed to the protests,” Mr. Rose explains.

This fear consumes American journalists still. When Muslim gunmen shot up the offices of the French satire magazine Charlie Hebdo last month for again satirizing Muhammad, several cable networks scrambled the images of the offending cartoons. The New York Times refused to print them and editor Dean Baquet publicly called a professor who questioned this self-censorship an [expletive deleted].

Mr. Rose's life is now forever marked by the Cartoon Crisis. He's had about a decade to reflect on some daunting questions, including, "What do you say to people who ask how you can sleep at night when hundreds of people have died because of what you have done?"

His book-length answer to that question is impressive. "The Tyranny of Silence" is one of the three or four best books that the libertarian Cato Institute has ever had a hand in publishing — up there with Gene Healy's "The Cult of the Presidency" and Jonathan Rauch's other free speech classic, "The Kindly Inquisitors." Not coincidentally, the back cover of Mr. Rose's work carries an endorsement by Mr. Rauch, which begins, "Should I be afraid to blurb this book? Reading it makes me wonder."

The book is not so much a rousing defense of freedom of expression as an exploration of what happens when journalists cave in to the censors, the would-be ayatollahs, the placard wavers or just the ordinary decent people who don't understand why we can't all be nicer. It documents a ratchet effect more pronounced in Muslim countries and communities but present in every society. Some folks claim offense, they are conciliated, the conciliations are passed into law, and this only emboldens more people to be outraged.

"If you want a picture of the future," warned George Orwell, "imagine a boot stomping on a human face — forever." After reading Mr. Rose's book, we'll have to add the twist that in a future dystopia drained of protections to speak freely, the boot stompers will lay it all on the victims with cries of "You have offended me."