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The necessarily exorbitant cost of free speech

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Back in January, I wrote about the mass murder of 11 journalists and a police officer in Paris at the right bank offices of Charlie Hebdo, a French weekly magazine, known for its satirical articles, cartoons and equal opportunity lampooning.

As I stated then, for those of us Francophones who have lived

in France, or spent considerable time in Paris during the last two decades, the question, sadly, was not *if* something like what occurred would, but when.

Long before the events that transpired on May 3 in Garland, Texas, resulting from the fairly moronic cartoon contest arranged by Pamela Geller's organization, the American Freedom Defense Initiative, some members of PEN, an association of writers, were suffering from their own collective crisis of conscience relative to the free speech they so thoroughly enjoy.

PEN America, with over 4,000 American writer members, awards more than \$150,000 to writers of fiction, science, essays, sports, biography, children's literature, translation, drama or poetry. The PEN Literary Awards are the most wide-ranging and inclusive in the U.S., and the PEN American Center in N.Y. holds an annual gala during which the awards are bestowed. (There are over 145 PEN Centers around the world.)

This year, PEN America was set to confer its annual Freedom of Expression Courage award on Charlie Hebdo. Then, in what can only be described as stunning, six prominent authors, including Joyce Carol Oates, tried (unsuccessfully) to repeal the Hebdo award. Two hundred other PEN authors signed a petition stating that their organization was "valorizing selectively offensive material: material that intensifies the anti-Islamic, anti-Maghreb, anti-Arab sentiments already prevalent in the Western world."

What?

With all due respect to the six authors who boycotted the event and 200 of their closest, petition-signing friends, their collective crisis of conscience comes off sounding eerily like an absurd conversation I was privy to back in the mid-1980s in Rome, where four wealthy Italians possessing multiple Mercedes-Benzes in their respective driveways, espoused the importance and many virtues of communism.

It is easy to talk about something in the theoretical abstract (even though Italy still has a significant communist party), when all of your economic needs, and then some, are met. Likewise, it is apparently easy to espouse that freedom of speech should be limited and peer awards not given to those who express their thoughts simply because you disagree with the content.

What is freedom of speech after all if not to express ideas, content and thoughts to those of differing opinions and mindsets? Is that not the point of this inalienable hallmark right?

Charlie Hebdo, established in 1970, has long been famous in France for its controversial and erudite, though often flippant content. What makes Charlie Hebdo revered and respected, is that no one person, institution, religion or political entity is spared from its never-ending satire. It pokes fun at all religions across the board, and

all politicians, especially the political far right. No one person or institution is safe from its dastardly lampoons and often shocking cartoons.

Without a doubt, much of what Charlie Hebdo prints is off-color and obnoxious. It is also often incendiary and offensive. To many.

And therein lies the crucial and not so subtle difference between the annual PEN Freedom of Expression Courage award to Charlie Hebdo, and the events in Garland. (Though the difference still does not warrant shutting AFDI or its message down, irrespective of how offensive their message is considered.)

Geller's AFDI group organized a cartoon contest, with a \$10,000 purse, aimed specifically at satirizing one religion, Islam. Under Islam, any physical depictions of the Prophet Muhammad are considered sacrilege. The cartoons were, understandably, offensive to Muslims.

Can you imagine the extreme and immediate public outcry that would have resulted nationwide had the AFDI been instead targeting Catholics or Jews, with a similarly offensive cartoon contest?

However offensive one may find the AFDI's activities, the right to freely assemble and its twin siblings, freedom of speech and freedom of the press, are the backbone and hallmark of a true democratic society. Once content starts to be censored or destroyed because it is disliked or found offensive, we then start the damning descent onto a slippery slope; one float away from a parade of horrors, much like that found in Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel, "Fahrenheit 451."

AFDI's activities appear to be racist in intent. And as obnoxious as that may be to many people, AFDI has a right to gather and spew their views, no matter how offensive to the majority or minority they target. And that right has zero to do with the fact that the AFDI chose as the target of their offensive speech, Islam, and its Muslim followers.

In January of last year, I was in England for the London Book Festival, which took place the same week that Britain observed the Holocaust Memorial Day. At the time, the British and European news were embroiled in heated discussions about the upcoming expiration of the German copyright of "Mein Kampf," one of the most racist, bigoted and morally offensive books to appear since humans put ink to paper. It outlines obnoxious views on Aryan purity, expresses Hitler's contempt for Jews and Communists, and lays out the blueprint for The Final Solution.

Next year, upon the copyright expiration, and for the first time since World War II, "Mein Kampf" is to be republished in Germany in the interest of "freedom of science." (The German government owns the copyright to the book and had, until now, stopped all prior efforts to republish it, calling the book "seditious" and that it should never reappear in the German language.)

Perhaps most interesting was that German's Central Council of Jews did not oppose the book's republication. Keep in mind that Germany's own Jewish citizens, along with millions of their European Jewish brethren perished across the continent's heartland at the hands of those swayed by Hitler's deeply disturbed and rambling delusions. (Including the six siblings and parents of this writer's Austrian grandfather and countless other extended family members.)

While one's knee-jerk reaction in the interest of ethnic tolerance and racial equality would be to race to the courthouse to enjoin the presses to such offensive material, the fact is the copyright will soon expire and the legal rights to republish "Mein Kampf" exist with the German government.

Perhaps more important, are the non-negotiable principles of free speech, and the moral and academic reasons "Mein Kampf" absolutely should go to reprint. And those are exactly the reasons why the PEN America author boycotters' conduct has been so thoroughly criticized, indeed crucified, across the board, by liberals and conservatives alike. They are also the reasons AFDI, no matter how offensive their content, must be allowed to gather and to spew their offensive vitriol.

In perhaps the most important free speech manifesto of all time, "Areopagitica," which came out during the height of England's civil war in the 17th century, John Milton posited, "[T]hat which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary." And perhaps even more profound he wrote, "Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties." Hence, in Milton's opinion, and mine, bad books and ideas, may ultimately have good results - and even those that don't, simply must be available to us so we may judge their value ourselves. Even for the most offensive books and ideas.

As any decent student of history will tell you, suppressing those ideas may ultimately have even far more offensive consequences than the writer or speaker originally intended.

Our principles of democracy and the rights it affords those of us lucky enough to call ourselves American, those rights worshipped by many the world over, should not take a back seat to religion or its sensibilities. Nor should those rights be used as leverage, so we end up, out of fear, kowtowing to those who seek to suppress them. The danger of that should be abundantly clear. And kept in the forefront should be Voltaire's wise words "I may not agree with what you have to say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it."

Kudos to PEN America for standing strong to preserve the freedom of speech its members and the rest of us enjoy. And *chaleureuses felicitations* to PEN America Freedom of Expression Courage award winner Charlie Hebdo, which award was accepted by its editor, Gerard Biard, and its film critic, Jean-Baptiste Thoret. As Biard said, the enemies of free speech must be "disarmed." Indeed.

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