

Bush condemns protests against anti-Muslim cartoons

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The Bush administration shifted its position on the publication of anti-Muslim cartoons in the European press, condemning the protests which have swept the Muslim world and suggesting that the demonstrations were being fomented by Iran, Syria and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

After initially deploring a Danish newspaper's publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad as a terrorist, the White House and State Department have now dropped any criticism and sought to wrap the racist slurs in the mantle of "freedom of the press," while exploiting the developing political crisis to further Washington's own geo-political aims.

A front-page article in Thursday's *Washington Post* reported: "Bush has made a calculated decision to focus on the violence in recent days, according to White House aides." This represented "a shift in White House strategy to focusing on the killings and destruction during Muslim protests in several nations—in contrast to earlier statements that included criticism of the provocative drawings."

The initial State Department reaction to the affair, issued last Friday, began by declaring that "Inciting religious or ethnic hatreds in this manner is not acceptable." Thursday's *Post* account noted, "Some US officials considered the response too harsh, however, and not sufficiently supportive of free speech."

The shift began Tuesday when Bush telephoned Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen to express solidarity with Denmark. White House spokesman Scott McClellan described the purpose of the call as reiterating "the importance of tolerance and respect for religions of all faith, and freedom of press."

Rasmussen's government depends upon the political support of the Danish People's Party, a racist anti-immigrant party which has close ties to the *Jyllands-Posten*, the Danish newspaper that touched off the conflict by publishing the cartoons last fall. According to recent

press accounts, Rasmussen played a key role in transforming the local dispute into an international incident when he refused to respond to a petition signed by 17,000 Danish Muslims deploring the publication of the cartoons. He followed this up by refusing to meet with the ambassadors of a dozen Muslim countries who wished to express their concern.

Also Tuesday, Vice President Dick Cheney gave an interview to the Public Broadcasting System television program *NewsHour*, in which he declared, "We believe very deeply in freedom of expression. Obviously, we think, you know, that it's appropriate for people to respect one another's religions, but I don't believe that the printing of those cartoons justifies the violence that we've seen."

At a White House ceremony Wednesday for the visiting King Abdullah of Jordan, Bush went out of his way to focus on the reaction to the anti-Muslim cartoons, rather than the provocation itself, saying, "We reject violence as a way to express discontent with what may be printed in a free press."

A few hours later, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spelled out the real targets of the US government, declaring, "I have no doubt that Iran and Syria have gone out of their way to inflame sentiments and have used this for their own purposes. The world ought to call them on it."

There are two major factors driving the decision to shift the focus from the original provocation to the reaction among Muslims, and neither has anything to do with concern for freedom of speech.

In the short-term, American officials have been particularly alarmed by the explosive reaction in Afghanistan, where the US-installed puppet government of President Hamid Karzai exercises little sway beyond the capital city, Kabul. There is growing concern in Washington that the Muslim protests could ignite a

broader movement of opposition that would make the country ungovernable or require the reinforcement of the US occupation force at a time when the military is already stretched thin in Iraq.

At least a dozen protesters have been killed by US, NATO and Afghan troops in Kabul and outside US and NATO bases. The latest atrocity came in Qalat, in the southern part of the country, where Afghan police fired Wednesday into a crowd marching on an American military base, killing four.

A US military spokesman in Afghanistan, in a statement to CBS News, initially attributed the violence to Al Qaeda or Taliban guerrillas, but then admitted there was no evidence to back up this allegation. The Pentagon faces an apparent dilemma in suggesting a major Taliban role in the mass protests, since it has routinely claimed that the Islamic fundamentalists are a small and discredited minority with dwindling support.

In the longer-term—and this is perhaps calculated in months rather than years—the Bush administration seeks to encourage the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment in both the US and Europe in order to provide a new base of political support for its plans for further military aggression in the Middle East, targeting in the first place Iran and Syria. The White House and State Department believe that support from Germany, France and other European countries, in addition to Britain, is an indispensable requirement for such military action.

In the United States, the slogan of “freedom of the press” has been employed to delude sections of the liberal middle class to support a profoundly reactionary and anti-democratic provocation. Those who have been taken in by this propaganda should pause to reflect on their alignment with the Bush administration, the most vicious enemy of democratic rights.

Who is posturing as defenders of “free speech” and “freedom of the press”? A government that warned its critics, after 9/11, to “watch what they say,” that banned the photographing of caskets bearing the remains of the Iraqi war dead returning to the US, that routinely denies Freedom of Information Act requests, and is now seeking to turn the exposure of its illegal spying into a pretext for press censorship, with a security investigation to find those who leaked the NSA spying story to the *New York Times*.

The claim that the publication of the provocative cartoons was an assertion of democratic rights is ludicrous. Even the pro-war *Washington Post* observed, in an editorial Tuesday, “there is no threat to freedom of

speech in Europe—no newspaper was prevented from publishing the cartoons, and demands by Muslims that European governments impose such censorship were quickly dismissed. In reprinting the drawings the European papers demonstrated not their love of freedom but their insensitivity—or hostility—to the growing diversity of their own societies. It is just such attitudes, more than any insult to Islam, that have inspired much of the Muslim resentment toward the West, and the growing anger of Muslims who live in Europe.”

The unity of much of the European press, liberal and conservative, in declaring the “right” to publish anti-Muslim cartoons is an ominous political development. It signifies a rallying of all sections of the European ruling elite behind a policy of whipping up racist and anti-immigrant sentiment at home, and greater willingness to use military force abroad.

It is impossible to divorce this episode from the bloody history of the countries of the Middle East, most of which were, within living memory, ruled by brutal colonial regimes established by European powers like Britain, France and Italy. Even after nominal independence in the post-World War II period, the entire region was dominated by imperialism—that of the United States—exercised through the giant corporations that controlled oil and gas resources, rather than through direct political rule. And today, with the US conquest of Iraq and Afghanistan, direct colonial-style control is being restored.

It is these material interests—above all, the struggle for control over oil and gas resources—not questions of religious belief or culture that underlie the current conflict. It is a clash of imperialist powers vs. oppressed and exploited peoples, not a clash of civilizations. If Hindus rather than Moslems inhabited territories where three quarters of the world’s petroleum reserves were located, the Western press would likely be howling about the prohibition of cow-slaughter or the Hindu caste system, not the ban on depicting the prophet Muhammad.



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