

San Diego student-run high school newspaper pressured to retract a political cartoon criticizing the genocide against Gaza

David Rye**4 December 2023**

On November 3, the school paper of Bonita Vista High School, *The Crusader*, posted a political cartoon, which criticized Israel's genocidal campaign against Gaza and those who falsely equate the "violence on both sides."

Bonita Vista High school is in the Sweetwater Union High School District in Chula Vista, the second largest school district in San Diego County, with more than 36,000 students and 1,500 educators.

The cartoon unleashed a firestorm of controversy, and a heated public school board meeting where Zionists attacked the students who made the cartoon, the publication that published it, and the entire school leadership from teacher to the principal for not censoring the school paper.

On November 3, shortly after the initial publication of the cartoon, the principal of Bonita Vista High school said "students have editorial control over their publication which by law cannot be censored by administration or teaching staff. We do want to be clear that the views of *The Crusader*, specifically this editorial are not the views of the Sweetwater Union High School District, BVHS Administration or BVHS staff."

The cartoon, which was captioned, "Centrism, insufferable and inhumane," shows on one side an elephant with a Star of David, meant to represent Israel, and Uncle Sam. The elephant is carrying a sign that reads, "We want to genocide Palestinians" and Uncle Sam is holding a sign that says, "We are entitled to foreign land."

Standing on the opposite side of the frame is a deer and man in a mask holding a Palestinian flag. The deer is holding a sign that says, "We want freedom." Standing in the middle is a man with a sign saying, "Both sides are valid," with the word "valid" replacing "wrong."

At the school board meeting on November 13, discussion was focused on the cartoon and the broader conflict. Many teachers, parents and community members spoke in support

of the students.

The first speaker was an Iranian student who defended *The Crusader* stating, "Someone creating a cartoon in a newspaper is their First Amendment right." Rejecting claims that the cartoon was "antisemitic," the student explained, "Semites are those who speak Semitic languages, which include Arabs and Palestinians ... Zionism is antisemitism."

The student described harassment she had received in the district, saying, "I was called a terrorist from the time I was 5." She concluded her speech forcefully: "Israel needs to be condemned."

One of the Bonita Vista alumni, who was a part of *The Crusader* publication, denounced the effort to "censor and quite frankly defame" those who published the cartoon.

"To see these students harassed by members of the community, simply because they condemned a genocide—which is what UN experts have officially called this; they have named what is happening in Palestine an ethnic cleansing—it is another level. Experts consider this to be the most sustained and intense bombing campaign of a populated area in history. It is ridiculous that students are under fire for condemning this, when there are people who are literally under fire right now."

"These students did not target Israeli citizens, they did not target anyone in the Jewish community—many of which condemn the genocide that is being perpetrated by the Israeli government as well. They targeted the governments that continue to enable this horrific violence ... There is no middle ground when it comes to genocide: there is opposing it, or condoning it, and silence serves the latter."

One BVHS parent, Tommy Broudy, who had previously called for the cartoon to be censored, denounced the cartoon as "reeking" of antisemitic tropes and said that, "hopefully, it is not coming to our campuses." After his speech, Broudy called his son up to the mic to read from the Hamas charter; despite going over the time limit while reading the Hamas

charter, the student continued to speak.

This was met with shouts from students in the audience that they were over time. The president of the school board, Nicolas Segura, warned the audience that the meeting would go into recess.

A student in the audience retorted, “Why don’t you keep them on time then?” Segura responded by ordering the room to empty, and the meeting recessed for about 10 minutes.

Broudy had previously written a letter to the principal of Bonita Vista High School, saying, “Your response that there is nothing that could be done is not acceptable. All speech has limits.” This letter continued, “In the days following the George Floyd murder, it is hard to imagine that a cartoon depicting terrible and racist anti-black sentiment would have been published.”

Another speaker provocatively declared, “this is not journalism, this is propaganda of the most insidious kind,” which was immediately met with shouting from the audience. The speaker continued. “What Liberal nonsense are you teaching these children ... This is firmly un-American, and tragically antisemitic.” This speaker proceeded to blame teachers for the growth of criticisms of Zionism.

An article published by the *San Diego Jewish World* referred to the cartoon as an “anti-Israel, anti-American cartoon.” Such remarks are reminiscent of the HUAC—HouseUn-AmericanActivitiesCommittee—hearings and the McCarthyite witch hunts.

Broudy obtained 274 signatories on a letter demanding that the Sweetwater Union High School District adopt the Fighting Antisemitism on Campuses Effectively (FACE) initiative. FACE facilitates the teaching of Zionism in schools and explicitly defines anti-Israeli sentiment as antisemitism. It calls for investigations into groups “deemed presumptively to be hate organizations,” such as “Students for Justice in Palestine, IfNotNow, Jewish Voices for Peace,” and “to the extent permitted by law, revoke and deny university recognition.”

The curator of the Remember Us the Holocaust exhibit at the Rancho San Diego County Library, Sandra Scheller, talking down to the students, called the publication of the cartoon a “teachable moment.” When she spoke at the district board meeting, she insinuated that the cartoon could end up in an exhibit, not unlike the one she is curating, as an example of the growth of antisemitism that may lead to genocide.

Adding insult to injury, San Diego County District Attorney Summer Stephan indicated the cartoon had been “referred to our Special Operations- Hate Crimes Division to review for any potential criminal conduct working with the

police department.”

Under immense pressure and threats of criminal charges of a hate crime, the students who run the Bonita Vista *Crusader* removed the cartoon from their website.

In a November 17 article in the *Crusader* headlined, “The consequences of free speech,” the authors stated, “The *Crusader*, as a whole, has become aware of how the BVH Jewish community perceive this to be anti-Semitic,” and cited Editor-in-Chief and senior Grace Na who added, “The Editorial Board is deeply concerned with the unintended harm the editorial cartoon may have caused.”

The claim that *how something is perceived* should outweigh *what it actually is* has a clear ideological source. It is a product of the influence of irrationalist thought in schools. Postmodernism, marked for its rampant subjectivism and opposition to objective truth, encourages attitudes that hold all “truths” to be equal. It is from this concept that people and people groups are able to claim “their truth,” which other groups are barred from criticizing or challenging.

The withdrawal of the cartoon is not the fault of the students, whose political impulses are well-intentioned. However students must be warned that the act of self-censorship gives credence to the attacks on democratic rights. Across the globe, artists and workers standing up against genocide are facing censorship, including actresses such as Melissa Barerra and Susan Sarandon.

Meanwhile, the most important political prisoner, Julian Assange, has languished in the United Kingdom’s high-security Belmarsh prison since 2019 for publishing and exposing US war crimes in WikiLeaks. It is true, the US state *perceives* Assange to be a threat to its global hegemony. This is how the ruling class responds to the truth being told about the brutalities of war.

This same logic allows right-wing Zionists to claim that there is no “genocide” in *their* truth, and all opposition to the carpet bombing, terror, and war of extermination is “harmful” and even “anti-semitic.” It turns reality on its head and allows equal validity to all “perceptions.” This is precisely what the artist of the cartoon has criticized, the concept that both sides, oppressor and oppressed, attacker and victim, hold equal validity.



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