

Doonesbury cartoonist attacked for criticizing Charlie Hebdo

By Patrick Martin
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Garry Trudeau, the creator of the Doonesbury comic strip, has come under attack from right-wing editorialists and media pundits for publicly criticizing anti-Muslim cartoons appearing in the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, calling them a form of hate speech.

Trudeau's brief remarks were delivered at Long Island University April 10, where he received the George Polk Career Award for his more than four decades of work as a cartoonist, in the course of which he has frequently had to battle censorship of his outspoken liberal views. Only three years ago, 50 newspapers refused to carry his strip during a week when he bitingly attacked Republican politicians who oppose abortion rights even in the case of rape or incest.

The central point made by Trudeau is that *Charlie Hebdo* was engaged, not in satirizing the powerful, but in vilifying the most oppressed section of the French population, Muslim immigrants, who face the highest levels of unemployment, poverty, police harassment and imprisonment.

Trudeau was of course horrified by the bloody massacre in January at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, when an attack by two Islamist gunmen left 12 people dead, include most of the magazine's senior cartoonists. He contributed to an online tribute to the murdered cartoonists. His refusal to go along with the retrospective glorification of the content of the cartoons, despite the enormous wave of media propaganda that has followed, is an act of intellectual and moral courage.

For that very reason, his statement has been vilified as an attack on the victims of terrorism, in a series of columns by right-wing pundits, including David Frum of *The Atlantic*, Cathy Young of *Reason* magazine, and

Ross Douthat of the *New York Times*. of the Frum made the most sweeping attack, citing the killings at *Charlie Hebdo*, the related attack on a kosher bakery in Paris, and a subsequent attack in Copenhagen, Denmark, and declaring, "For this long record of death and destruction—and for many other deaths as well—Garry Trudeau blamed the people who drew and published the offending cartoons."

The right-wing pundit claims that Trudeau applied "privilege theory" to the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, justifying it because the victims were from the white elite, while the gunmen were from the immigrant Muslim underclass. "To fix the blame for the killing on the murdered journalists, rather than the gunmen, Trudeau invoked the underdog status of the latter," Frum writes.

He goes on to claim that news organizations in the United States that reported on the anti-Islam cartoons in *Charlie Hebdo* did not reprint them because they were afraid of terrorist attack, drawing the conclusion, "Violence does work."

Trudeau offered a different explanation for the non-publication of the anti-Muslim cartoons in an interview Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press," where he addressed the right-wing attack on his Long Island University remarks. US editors did not reprint the cartoons because they were demeaning and racist, he maintained. If similar cartoons had targeted African-Americans, they would be universally denounced and repudiated.

Douthat and Young both cite Frum's column approvingly in their own shorter diatribes, echoing his claim that Trudeau had based his remarks on an extreme version of identity politics. These criticisms are baseless slanders, as can be easily demonstrated by looking at what Trudeau actually said. The cartoonist

cited the example of the great satirists of the French Enlightenment.

“Traditionally, satire has comforted the afflicted while afflicting the comfortable. Satire punches up, against authority of all kinds, the little guy against the powerful. Great French satirists such as Molière and Daumier always punched up, holding up the self-satisfied and hypocritical to ridicule. Ridiculing the non-privileged is almost never funny—it’s just mean.

“By punching downward, by attacking a powerless, disenfranchised minority with crude, vulgar drawings closer to graffiti than cartoons, Charlie wandered into the realm of hate speech...”

The same issue was raised in a perspective published on the *World Socialist Web Site* immediately after the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*. WSWS Chairman David North rejected the claim by British historian Simon Schama that the French magazine was in the tradition of the great satirists of the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, writing:

Schama places *Charlie Hebdo* in a tradition to which it does not belong. All the great satirists to whom Schama refers were representatives of a democratic Enlightenment who directed their scorn against the powerful and corrupt defenders of aristocratic privilege. In its relentlessly degrading portrayals of Muslims, *Charlie Hebdo* has mocked the poor and the powerless.

North explained that the orgy of praise for *Charlie Hebdo*, summed up in the slogan “I am Charlie,” raised at demonstrations in Paris, was an effort to provide an ideological justification for US and French imperialism:

The killing of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists and editors is being proclaimed an assault on the principles of free speech that are, supposedly, held so dear in Europe and the United States. The attack on *Charlie Hebdo* is, thus, presented as another outrage by Muslims who cannot tolerate Western “freedoms.” From this the conclusion must be drawn that the “war on terror”—i.e., the imperialist onslaught on the Middle East, Central Asia and North and Central Africa—is an unavoidable necessity.

These efforts are doubly hypocritical, given the onslaught on democratic rights, including freedom of the press, in all the Western countries, especially the United States. The Obama administration has targeted

more journalists for surveillance and more whistleblowers for prosecution than any other in US history, singling out those who have played major roles in exposing the crimes of the US government, like Bradley (Chelsea) Manning, Edward Snowden, and Julian Assange.

Trudeau is not an avowed opponent of imperialism, but rather a liberal who apparently supports the Obama administration, albeit with some disappointment. That does not detract from the principled character of his public repudiation of the right-wing efforts to whip up anti-Muslim prejudice.

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