**Accepting films like 'Innocence of Muslims' is the price we pay for believing in free speech**

By Leonard Pitts September 19, 2012

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They are, perhaps, the most dangerous words ever written:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

That, for those who don't know, is the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

What makes those words dangerous is that they guarantee a freedom that, in the wrong hands (or even the right hands) can cause upset and outrage, even topple regimes. America confers that kind of power - freedom of expression, unfettered by government - equally to the conscientious and the flighty, the modest and the mighty, the noble and the most vile.

We've been arguing about it ever since, from the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which restricted criticism of the government, to Snyder v. Phelps in 2011, a [Supreme Court](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Foutlook&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Supreme+Court%22) ruling upholding the right of a hateful Kansas cult to picket military funerals. We are not ourselves at peace with those words. So it is no surprise foreigners have difficulty with them.

As Islamic extremists continue a campaign of anti-American violence over "Innocence of Muslims," a risibly wretched piece of Islamophobic propaganda, it is apparently an article of faith for many in that world that the film represents a U.S. government attack upon Islam. CNN's [Fareed Zakaria](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Foutlook&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Fareed+Zakaria%22) says they have "a lack of understanding of freedom of speech and opinion."

That's putting it mildly. And that ignorance has become a potentially deadly flashpoint in recent years. It used to be that only a few high-profile, theoretically responsible individuals had access to the world stage and the ability to affect world events. But with the advent of YouTube, Google, Facebook and Twitter, it is now conceivable some shlub in Fort Lauderdale could start a riot in Mogadishu. So the most dangerous words ever written have become more dangerous still.

Small wonder, then, that radio host [Tom Joyner](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Foutlook&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Tom+Joyner%22) recently called on Google to block the offending video from its search engine, which Google has refused to do. At the other end of the spectrum, [Newt Gingrich](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Foutlook&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Newt+Gingrich%22) told CNN last week that the U.S. should use this episode to "teach the Muslim world about freedom" - free speech in particular.

He's right. Even if it were possible to put the toothpaste back in the tube as Joyner demands, one has to ask: what next? If extremists on the far side of the world learn the lesson that we will abandon a core principle because they throw tantrums or even commit murder, what does that tell them about us? What might we next be bullied into doing?

There is nothing congenitally "Muslim" about the way some in the Middle East and Africa are responding to this film's insult of their religion. If there were, Muslims would be rioting in Cleveland and Detroit as well.

They are not, because Muslim-Americans, like other Americans, know there is a reason you embrace those dangerous words. Namely, that though they give license to outrage, offense and obscenity, they also give license to that which enlightens, ennobles and uplifts. They liberate the worst in us, but also the best, a trade-off Americans have always found worthwhile. We are now tasked with explaining that to parts of the world where the outrageous can't be said aloud and conformity is required by law.

That will not be easy, especially when Americans have been killed, and standing up for this principle requires you to stand behind a greasy little morsel like "Innocence of Muslims." Worse, we must make that case to those who have no framework to even understand what free expression is. But we have no choice. That is what this moment demands.

It is the price we pay for believing in dangerous words.

<http://www.chron.com/opinion/outlook/article/Pitts-Accepting-films-like-Innocence-of-3878738.php>

1. What is dangerous about free speech?
2. Why might people in some countries in the world have a difficult time understanding why this video is still on the internet?
3. Should Youtube and Google remove this video? Why or why not?