**Former ‘Onion’ editor: Freedom of speech cannot be killed**

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By [Joe Randazzo](http://www.msnbc.com/byline/joe-randazzo)

When I was editor there, *The Onion* was located in the heart of Manhattan and the one person manning our front entrance was our petite, tattooed office manager, Jessie. She was the definition of unthreatening, and we used to joke that she was the only thing standing between us and some heavily armed radicals, should any ever become enraged by something we put in print. Right now, that joke makes me sick to my stomach.

Twelve people were murdered at the offices of [*Charlie Hebdo*](http://www.msnbc.com/topics/charlie-hebdo), a French satirical newspaper, today, apparently for doing the very thing *The Onion* does: satire. These people – including one guest and one police officer – are dead. They were cartoonists and editors and humorists. People whose job in life was to point at hypocrisy and laugh at it; to ridicule hate; to make us all try to see our own failings as humans. And they were killed for it.

For those who would trivialize the idea, this was what an actual attack on freedom looks like.

Our joke at *The Onion* was, like most of our jokes, borne out of some reality. We received hateful letters and emails on a semi-regular basis. I’ve personally spoken on the phone with at least two individuals who threatened to rape me and kill my family. At one point, we even had to call the police. But I never could have imagined anything like this.

I admit: it scares me. This is radical ideology taken to an abhorrent new low. The footage and photographs that have so far emerged depict several armed men, dressed in tactical black. It looks like a highly organized attack, but an attack, ultimately, on what? An idea? You cannot kill an idea by murdering innocent people – though you can nudge it toward suicide.

That is the real threat: that we’ll allow our fear, or our anger, to kill ourselves.

This will be framed by many as the latest salvo in an ongoing war between the West and Islam, when what this really amounts to is the slaughter of innocent people. These murderers don’t represent anyone but themselves, their own twisted view of reality. They don’t stand for an entire religion anymore than the Westboro Baptist Church stands for an entire religion or the Ku Klux Klan stands for an entire race.

If it turns out that members of Al Qaeda or some other radical “Islamic” sect carried out this attack, the saddest, most profoundly ironic thing about it will have been that the satire worked. It did its job. It so threatened its target, cut so deeply at the truth, that it resorted to the most cowardly, most offensive and despicable form of lashing out.

Satire must always accompany any free society. It is an absolute necessity. Even in the most repressive medieval kingdoms, they understood the need for the court jester, the one soul allowed to tell the truth through laughter. It is, in many ways, the most powerful form of free speech because it is aimed at those in power, or those whose ideas would spread hate. It is the canary in the coalmine, a cultural thermometer, and it always has to push, push, push the boundaries of society to see how much it’s grown.

Our society is possibly the freest that humankind has yet produced and that freedom is predicated on one central idea: the right to speech. That right is understood as a natural extension of our very existence. In America, free speech is so important that the men who wrote our Bill of Rights put it first, but followed it up with our right to bear arms. To me, that’s always been a pretty strong message: Say what you want and, here, take some guns to make sure no one tries to stop you. But in this state of widespread social change – probably the most profound in centuries – we need to make sure that the ideal of the second amendment never, ever trumps the power of the first. That brute force never negates ideas.

This is a loss for all of humanity. The victims, people who believed with passion and intellect that humankind can be better, were struck down in the birthplace of the Enlightenment, the movement from which the modern world emanates.

The *Charlie Hebdo* gunmen also shot a police officer in the head as he lay dying on the sidewalk. These people are not just enemies of cartoonists or the ideals of the West. They’re enemies of human life. They care for nothing, believe in nothing worth believing in, and therefore their ideology, whatever it may be, is worthless. Moot. Not even worth our consideration for a moment.

They cannot kill everyone who disagrees with them. There are not enough bullets in the world for that. The most responsible thing we can do is be aware that the most likely threat to freedom will now come from within. We cannot, should not, police our own thoughts – or the thoughts of our fellow citizens. Because the First Amendment does not just protect our free speech; it protects all expression, including religion.

Nor can we lose sight of terrorism in any of its forms. Whether it comes from radicals abroad or radicals at home. No matter what ideas they try to kill on whatever end of the political spectrum.

Before we lose our sense of optimism, however, try to keep some scale in mind: The idea of human rights is a relatively new one to human society, only a few hundred years old. It’s a part of our intellectual outlook now, inextricable from our daily lives, but it is still making its way into our hearts, our DNA. I can only hope that tragedies like the one in Paris would make our ideals stronger, not weaker.

Is that an ideal worth dying for? I think it is. Should anyone ever have to pay for it with blood? I pray to God not. And it doesn’t really matter that I don’t quite know how to believe in God. Today, I’m praying anyway.

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