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**From:** Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Monday, September 24, 2012 9:42 AM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** Fw: Bill Keller piece

An interesting piece. The argument that worked on my conservative Obama-hating (Hillary-respecting) friends, which Keller hints at in the "slack" he'll cut us, is that our denunciations of the video aren't an effort to debate the mob; they are an effort to give ammo to the right side to win the battle that Keller himself identifies (between extremists seeking to put "pressure" on weak transitional governments and the more mainstream majority that supports those governments). And you could say it worked. Governments stepped up. Extremist groups in Tunisia are backpedalling. Etc.

So we need to make this argument forcefully.

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**From:** Valliani, Amira  
**Sent:** Monday, September 24, 2012 09:18 AM  
**To:** Sullivan, Jacob J  
**Subject:** Bill Keller piece

# The Satanic Video

By **BILL KELLER**

THE alchemy of modern media works with amazing speed. Start with a cheesy anti-Muslim video that resembles a bad trailer for a Sacha Baron Cohen comedy. It becomes YouTube fuel for protest across the Islamic world and a pretext for killing American diplomats. That angry spasm begets an inflammatory Newsweek cover, "MUSLIM RAGE," which in turn inspires a Twitter hashtag that reduces the whole episode to a running joke:

"There's no prayer room in this nightclub. #MuslimRage."

"You lose your nephew at the airport but you can't yell his name because it's JIHAD. #MuslimRage."

From provocation to trauma to lampoon in a few short news cycles. It's over in a week, forgotten in two. Now back to Snooki and Honey Boo Boo.

Except, of course, it's far from over. It moves temporarily off-screen, and then it is back: the Pakistani retailer accused last week of "blasphemy" because he refused to close his shops during a protest against the video; France locking down diplomatic outposts in about 20 countries because a Paris satirical newspaper has published new caricatures of the prophet.

It's not really over for Salman Rushdie, whose new memoir recounts a decade under a clerical death sentence for the publication of his novel "The Satanic Verses." That fatwa, if

not precisely the starting point in our modern confrontation with Islamic extremism, was a major landmark. The fatwa was dropped in 1998 and Rushdie is out of hiding, but he is still careful. His book tour for “Joseph Anton” (entitled for the pseudonym he used in his clandestine life) won’t be taking him to Islamabad or Cairo.

Rushdie grew up in a secular Muslim family, the son of an Islam scholar. His relationship to Islam was academic, then literary, before it became excruciatingly personal. His memoir is not a handbook on how America should deal with the Muslim world. But he brings to that subject a certain moral authority and the wisdom of an unusually motivated thinker. I invited him to help me draw some lessons from the stormy Arab Summer.

The first and most important thing Rushdie will tell you is, it’s not about religion. Not then, not now.

When the founding zealot of revolutionary Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, issued his Rushdie death warrant in 1989, the imam was not defending the faith; he was trying to regenerate enthusiasm for his regime, sapped by eight years of unsuccessful war with Iraq. Likewise, Muslim clerics in London saw the fatwa against a British Indian novelist as an opportunity to arouse British Muslims, who until that point were largely unstirred by sectarian politics. “This case was a way for the mosque to assert a kind of primacy over the community,” the novelist said the other day. “I think something similar is going on now.”

It’s pretty clear that the protests against that inane video were not spontaneous. Antiseccular and anti-American zealots, beginning with a Cairo TV personality whose station is financed by Saudi fundamentalists, seized on the video as a way to mobilize pressure on the start-up governments in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. The new governments condemned the violence and called in police to protect American diplomatic outposts, but not before a good bit of nervous wobbling.

(One of the principal goals of the extremists, I was reminded by experts at Human Rights First, who follow the region vigilantly, is to pressure these transitional governments to enact and enforce strict laws against blasphemy. These laws can then be used to purge secularists and moderates.)

Like the fanatics in the Middle East and North Africa, our homegrown hatemongers have an interest in making this out to be a great clash of faiths. The Islamophobes — the fringe demagogues behind the Koran-burning parties and that tawdry video, the more numerous (mainly right-wing Republican) defenders against the imaginary encroachment of Islamic law on our domestic freedom — are easily debunked. But this is the closest thing we have to a socially acceptable form of bigotry. And their rants feed the anti-American opportunists.

Rushdie acknowledges that there are characteristics of Islamic culture that make it tinder for the inciters: an emphasis on honor and shame, and in recent decades a paranoid sense of the world conspiring against them. We can argue who is more culpable — the hostile West, the sponsors, the appeasers, the fanatics themselves — but Islam has been particularly susceptible to the rise of identity politics, Rushdie says. “You define yourself by what offends you. You define yourself by what outrages you.”

But blaming Islamic culture dismisses the Muslim majorities who are not enraged, let alone violent, and it leads to a kind of surrender: Oh, it’s just the Muslims, nothing to be done. I detect a whiff of this cultural fatalism in Mitt Romney’s patronizing remarks about the superiority of Israeli culture and the backwardness of Palestinian culture. That would explain his assertion, on that other notorious video, that an accommodation with the Palestinians is “almost unthinkable.” That’s a strangely defeatist line of thought for a man who professes to be an optimist and a problem-solver.

Romney and Rushdie are a little more in tune when it comes to mollifying the tender feelings of irate Muslims.

In his new book, Rushdie recounts being urged by the British authorities who were protecting him to “lower the temperature” by issuing a statement that could be taken for an apology. He does so. It fills him almost immediately with regret, and the attacks on him are unabated. He “had taken the weak position and was therefore treated as a weakling,” he writes.

Of the current confrontation, he says, “I think it’s very important that we hold our ground. It’s very important to say, ‘We live like this.’ ” Rushdie made his post-fatwa life in America in part because he reveres the freedoms, including the freedom, not so protected in other Western democracies, to say hateful, racist, blasphemous things.

“Terrible ideas, reprehensible ideas, do not disappear if you ban them,” he told me. “They go underground. They acquire a kind of glamour of taboo. In the harsh light of day, they are out there and, like vampires, they die in the sunlight.”

And so he would have liked a more robust White House defense of the rights that made the noxious video possible.

“It’s not for the American government to regret what American citizens do. They should just say, ‘This is not our affair and the [violent] response is completely inappropriate.’ ”

I would cut the diplomats a little more slack when they are trying to defuse an explosive situation. But I agree that the administration pushed up against the line that separates

prudence from weakness. And the White House request that Google consider taking down the anti-Muslim video, however gentle the nudge, was a mistake.

By far the bigger mistake, though, would be to write off the aftermath of the Arab Spring as a lost cause.

It is fairly astounding to hear conservatives who were once eager to invade Iraq — ostensibly to plant freedom in the region — now giving up so quickly on fledgling democracies that might actually be won over without 10 bloody years of occupation. Or lamenting our abandonment of that great stabilizing autocrat Hosni Mubarak. Or insisting that we bully and blackmail the new governments to conform to our expectations.

These transition governments present an opportunity. Fortifying the democratic elements in the post-Arab Spring nation-building, without discrediting them as American stooges, is a delicate business. The best argument we have is not our aid money, though that plays a part. It is the choice between two futures, between building or failing to build a rule of law, an infrastructure of rights, and an atmosphere of tolerance. One future looks something like Turkey, prospering, essentially secular and influential. The other future looks a lot like Pakistan, a land of fear and woe.

We can't shape the Islamic world to our specifications. But if we throw up our hands, if we pull back, we now have a more vivid picture of what will fill the void.