

Barbara Kay: Kathy Griffin just learned a tough lesson about free speech — sometimes, people tell you you're fired

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Courtesy of Tyler Shields
Griffin poses with a fake severed head of U.S. President Donald Trump.

Pity naive comedian Kathy Griffin. She discovered, to her cost, there are limits to tolerance for edgy humour, even amongst the entertainment world's most irreverent, Trump- loathing denizens.

In a now- infamous photo released by photographer Tyler Shields on Twitter last week, a deadpan Griffin holds aloft — in mock ISIL- style trophy mode — the bloody, lookalike “head” of Donald Trump.

Griffin waited for the laughter that never came.

Instead, the stunt provoked fiercely condemnatory blowback. It didn't help that Trump's 11- year old son Barron suffered the shock of seeing the photo on TV and thinking it was real, after which his parents expressed their eminently justified revulsion at Griffin's enormous gaffe. For perhaps the only moment in his life, Donald Trump became an object of non- partisan sympathy.

Anger at Griffin then took material form.

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CNN terminated her steady, New Years Eve co- host job with Anderson Cooper. Four November comedy shows were cancelled in Northeastern states as well as a gig at a New Mexico casino. Griffin lost her endorsement deal with Squatty Potty. Democratic senator, former comedian and personal friend Al Franken at first stood by Griffin and their contract to co- host a book launch July 7, but then, perhaps reflecting on the fact that Hillary Clinton had won his home state of Minnesota by only 45,000 votes in the presidential election, gently bailed.

Too late, the photo was removed from Twitter. Shocked at the mobbing, Griffin grovelled: “I crossed the line” and “I beg for your forgiveness.” Later, clearly panicking over her career meltdown, a lachrymose but combative Griffin held a press conference, in which she tried to present herself as a portrait of courage. “I'm not laying down for this guy,” she said, referring to Trump. “I'm going to keep making jokes about this guy.” But she also attempted to shift the blame and brand herself as the victim in the affair by accusing the Trumps of “trying to ruin my rights forever.”
(-- image--)

Now that's just plain silly. Americans are privileged to enjoy speech rights that are the envy of the world. Nobody was attempting to “ruin” anyone's speech rights. Like many other progressives, Griffin seems not to understand that (except on university campuses, alas) freedom of speech generally works both ways: Trump “resisters” are free to speak their minds in America, and so are others — including Donald and Melania Trump, everyone with a Twitter account and the folks who employed Griffin at CNN and elsewhere who did not want to be associated with her blunder. In this case, the free speech the latter employed was, “You're fired.”

A Huffington Post article tried to mitigate Griffin's social crime by comparing her photo to the widely circulated, and somewhat shocking, satirical photo of Trump kissing Putin, but that is a poor comparison. The point of satire is to hold the hypocrisy or duplicity of people in high places up to ridicule in order to chivvy the target into a more ethical and appropriate line of behaviour. The authentically satirical Trump- Putin kiss points to an actual concern about illicit political collusion, implicitly calling on Trump to clean up his wanton, often highly un- presidential behaviour. Griffin did not use mockery to effect change, but to invite derision through a powerfully hateful image. She must have gauged the general disgust for Trump as capacious enough to absorb the image's transgressive punch.

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There is plenty of disgust for Trump to draw on, to be sure, but the vehicle for her invitation was where the canker gnawed. Griffin chose as a symbol for mockery an icon of Islamist terrorism that is a byword for unspeakable cruelty and barbarism. ISIL, and other Islamist groups, film beheadings for maximum intimidating effect. The action symbolizes their triumphalist goal of completely subjugating their enemies.

Several of their beheading victims have, agonizingly, been Americans. Griffin’s “joke” was no different in kind than if she had filmed an effigy of Trump being gassed at Auschwitz or – let’s imagine Griffin as a Hillary- phobe — an effigy of Hillary as a Yazidi sex slave. A bridge way too far, even for Americans in whom patriotism is a long- dormant sentiment. Griffin co- opted our historical moment’s ultimate expression of evil to convey her personal contempt for Trump. Americans rightly perceived this act as a repellant abuse of her democratic privilege.

I have no pity for Griffin. The photo was a puerile act of self- indulgence, and the only people laughing at it — apart from actual barbarians delighted to discover this accidental groupie on enemy territory — are the morally relativistic deplorables of the left.

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