

Thursday, May 27, 2004

## EDITORIAL

### Portland man becomes prey in overzealous war on terror

Three weeks ago today, a well-educated man woke up, dressed himself in a collared shirt and tie, and prepared for another day in the Portland area.

Brandon Mayfield probably kissed his wife goodbye before driving from his modest Aloha home to his nearby office, where he defends those accused of various offenses.

On that day, Mayfield was himself arrested but charged with no crime. He was taken from his Beaverton law office in a Ford Explorer and placed in custody as a material witness in the March 11 train bombing, an act of terror that killed 191 people in Madrid, Spain.

Mayfield was guilty of no offense — is guilty of no misdeed — except being the latest victim in the U.S. government's attempts to rid the world of terror, one Muslim at a time.

On Monday the FBI apologized to Mayfield for jailing him. The fingerprint that had been found on a bag of detonators halfway around the world wasn't his, the bureau conceded. In the next few weeks it will be determined how such an error was made, but it's becoming starkly clear that more than forensics were at play.

Three weeks before Mayfield's arrest — sometime in mid-April — Spanish authorities began questioning the FBI's conclusion that Mayfield's print was an exact match to the one found in Madrid. Yet it took five more weeks before FBI officials went to Spain to inspect the actual print.

Human error may have caused Mayfield to become a suspect, but lackadaisical government allowed his persecution. The government has said it arrested Mayfield because of media leaks and fear that he would run, should he realize his suspect status.

The truth of the matter is that the FBI had evidence it failed to properly evaluate, but it had a ton of ammunition it thought led to a smoking gun.

Aside from the fingerprint, Mayfield is a Muslim convert. According to The Oregonian, which reviewed an affidavit filed by prosecutors, Mayfield had ties to a group arrested for plotting against the country; Mayfield handled a child-custody case for one of the Portland Seven defendants. Additionally, on Sept. 11, 2002, Mayfield called a man who is now on the federal terror watch list. Mayfield also has been seen going to a mosque, and his law firm was listed in a business directory of a Portland man who was a business associate of Wadih el-Hage, a man convicted of bombing two U.S. embassies in Africa.

Even though Mayfield hadn't traveled outside the country and has an expired passport, the possibility existed, government officials suggested, that he could have traveled to Spain using another name.

Mayfield was taken into custody May 6.

Once in jail, Mayfield had his stay extended — investigators found \$10,000 in his safe deposit box, which also contained passports for his family. In the meantime, the FBI took about a quarter of Mayfield's client files, including those of clients "who have Arabic- or Muslim-sounding surnames."

The government, instead of double-checking and questioning its own results, put the burden of proof on Mayfield, all the while building up its case against him.

While it's legally true that justice has been achieved — Mayfield was released and exonerated — the man's life will never be the same. His face was in TIME magazine. And, simply by the nature of the case, his patriotism is forever unjustly tainted.

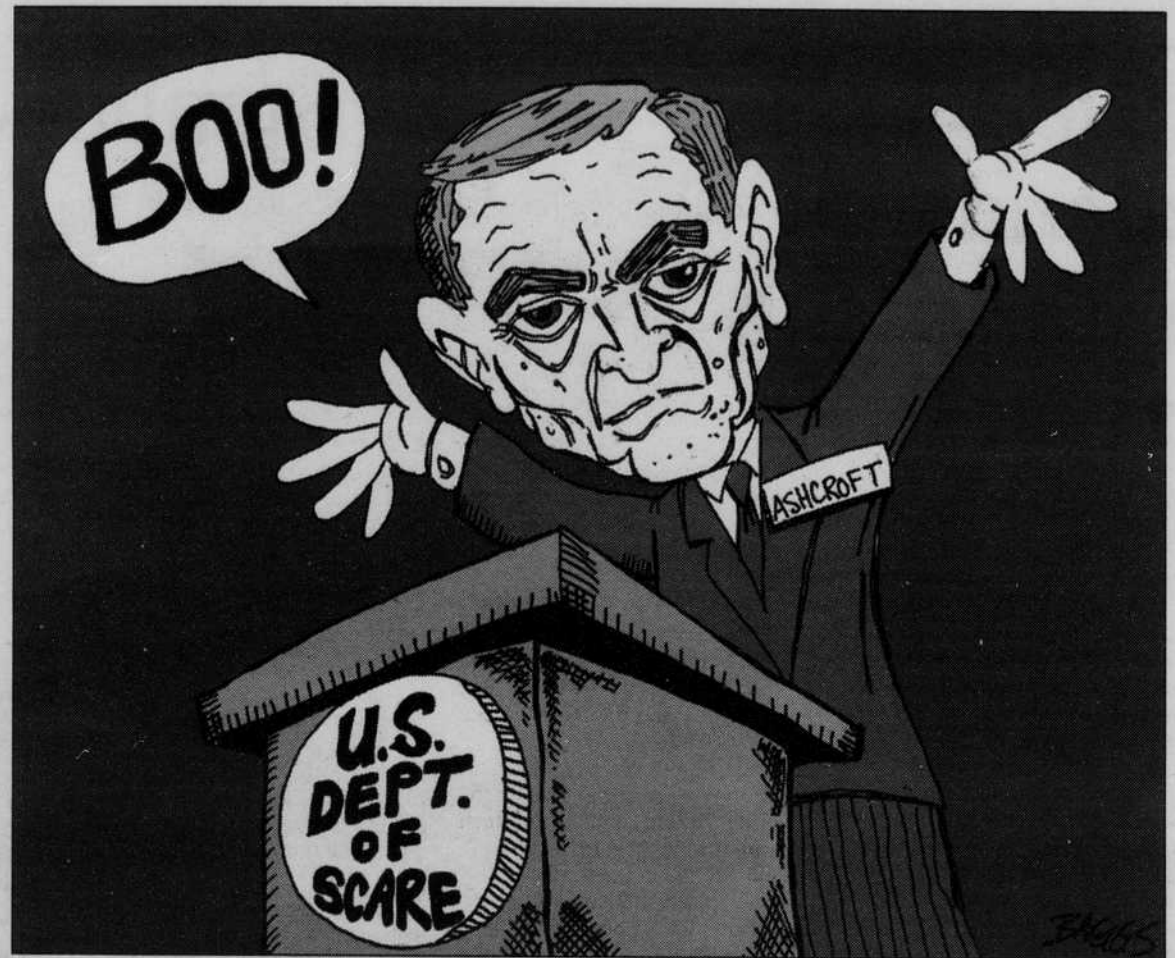
This could have happened to another man, but it probably wouldn't.

America's war on terror carries a simple premise: Guilty until proven innocent, especially if the suspect has skin, ideological or religious differences than that of the status quo.

The George W. Bush look-alike/think-alike would have made it home three weeks ago after a long day at work. He would have loosened his tie as he walked in the front door to his house. He would have greeted his wife with a kiss.

Mayfield should have gotten the same treatment.

He should have been treated like the innocent American he is.



Steve Baggs Illustration

## THE END OF THE SITCOM

I am old enough to know that sitcom is short for situation comedy, and recently two powerhouses in the genre, "Friends" and "Frasier," made their exits, stage left. Next year another hit, "Everybody Loves Raymond," will meet its maker and be sent to comedy heaven: non-stop syndication.

Although these three series had long ago become stale caricatures of themselves, they were responsible for keeping the genre of the sitcom — a genre I grew up on and still love — clinging to life. Now that they are gone forever, the survival of the situation comedy depends on an infusion of fresh blood in next season's fall pilots.

Well, last week the television networks unveiled their fall lineups for the first time to anxious advertisers, and I am prepared to mark the sitcom's official time of death.

Sitcoms will be absent from primetime in the fall at a level not seen since the early 1980s. Instead of scripted comedy, the networks will be cramming unscripted "reality" shows down our throats, as many as their conscience will allow, and these are television executives, so ...

For example, the unwatchable ABC will feature another new British reality show rip-off called "Wife Swap" (it is not what you think), as well as "The Benefactor," an "Apprentice" rip-off from Mark Cuban. They will be dropping sitcoms such as "I'm with Her," "It's all Relative," and "The Big House," although they are renewing "Hope and Faith" (God only knows why).

This same trend is happening up and down the dial. NBC will feature only four comedies next fall; at one point in the late 1990s, NBC had 16 sitcoms in its lineup, according to The New York Times.

Comedy writers are already in mourning. They are desperately asking the same question I am: Why are the networks running away from the sitcom? The first answer is obvious: Dead presidents. It costs

hundreds of thousands of dollars more to produce a scripted comedy than to drive Paris Hilton into the boondocks or boat a dozen-or-so retards onto an island.



David Jagernauth  
 Critical mass

The second reason is that young viewers, the most coveted demographic, are increasingly turning away from sitcoms and tuning into reality shows. As Bill Carter from The New York Times puts it: "Viewers, especially those under 35, seem to be bored with the entire conceit of setup/joke and four-to-six characters sitting around a sofa on a Hollywood sound stage."

They would much rather see the Osbournes or Anna Nicole Smith sitting around a sofa in their real homes, swearing, which seems to me to be infinitely more boring. The Sitcom Generation, my generation, is being outmuscled by Generation Unscripted in television land. And the consequences will be disastrous.

When sitcoms are at their best they do the work of a great piece of art and shine a spotlight on the human condition. While dramas show us humanity at its most extreme, sitcoms show us humanity at its most mundane, as we operate day-to-day, at home and at work, as we seek food, shelter, companionship and happiness.

Reality shows offer us none of this insight. They are empty and meaningless. The pleasure comes merely from being a voyeur. It is indicative of the slow,

painful death of art itself in this country. So many young people today seem uninterested in delving creative (and therefore, created) work for deeper meanings. They are unimpressed by the creative process. They're only interested and impressed in the surface of things, in the gimmick, and the raw reactions that result.

They don't want the comedy of a carefully crafted joke; they want the comedy of a ball to the crotch or a woman eating the balls of a rhinoceros. Rather than see the highs and lows of dating through scripted reenactment, they want to see a supermodel date a bunch of ugly guys, or a midget date average-sized girls. Rather than see fictional characters living normal lives, they want either to see celebrities living normal lives or ordinary people living extraordinary lives, because both satisfy our fame-lust, which seems to be the guiding human principle these days.

I am still holding out hope for the sitcom, however. "Seinfeld" reruns are the best thing on television these days, and they are a constant reminder of the power of the sitcom. "The Simpsons" is still going strong and another brilliant adult cartoon sitcom, "Family Guy," is back in production. If only they would do the same thing for "The Critic" and "Duckman."

And speaking of Jason Alexander, he will return to the boob tube this fall as a sportscaster in "Listen Up." Conan's hilarious sidekick Andy Richter will star in the sitcom "Quintuplets" on FOX. And maybe the "Friends" spin-off "Joey" won't be as bad as everyone is assuming.

The Sitcom Generation is left with only hope, and, unfortunately, "Hope and Faith."

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