Yale University keeps digging itself deeper and deeper into a hole. Unless you’ve been far, far away, you know the rudiments of the latest episode of academic pusillanimity.

The background: many months ago, Yale University Press contracted to publish a book called The Cartoons That Shook the World, by Jytte Klausen, a Danish-born scholar who teaches at Brandeis. The eponymous cartoons are, of course, the caricatures of Mohammed that the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published in September 2005. You know what happened then: members of the “religion of peace” rioted and set fire to sundry Danish embassies, leaving a trail of murder and mayhem that ultimately left some 200 people dead.

According to its advance press, Professor Klausen’s book, due out in November, argues that this violence was not a spontaneous upsurge by the Muslim “street”; rather, it was “orchestrated, first by those with vested interests in elections in Denmark and Egypt, and later by Islamic extremists seeking to destabilize governments in Pakistan, Lebanon, Libya, and Nigeria.” In other words, her book advocates a moderately pacific view of Islam: there is no “clash of civilizations” to worry about, just a bunch of hotheads and opportunists.

Still, it is hardly surprising that a book called The Cartoons That Shook the World would feature the cartoons that did the shaking. (Actually, it was we in the West that did most of the shaking, but never mind.) In fact, the book was to include not only the twelve caricatures from the Jyllands-Posten but also other artistic representations of Mohammed, notably Gustave Doré’s and Salvador Dali’s illustrations of Dante’s description, in Canto 28 of The Inferno, of Mohammed being tormented in Hell.

Professor Klausen’s book went through a rigorous vetting. Readers’ reports—including two from Muslim scholars—were unanimously favorable. The only Lib-Dem Muslim member of the House of Lords, Baroness Kishwer Falker, enthusiastically endorsed the book: “This tells the story that had to be told,” she said. “Deeply researched and sensitively written, it answers the questions of how and
what really happened. A must read!” Because of the controversial nature of the subject, the book was also vetted by YUP’s legal counsel and received the old imprimatur and nihil obstat. The YUP’s publications committee unanimously recommended the book for publication.

Now things get murky. In July, John Donatich, the director of the YUP, contacted Professor Klausen and suggested they have “a cup of coffee” in Boston. He later informed her that Linda Lorimer, Vice President and Secretary of the University, and Marcia Inhorn, a Professor of Anthropology and chairman of the Council on Middle East Studies at Yale, would be joining them.

This two-hour cup of coffee was not a pleasant occasion. It turned out that, at the last moment, Yale had decided to consult with two dozen “experts in the intelligence, national security, law enforcement, and diplomatic fields, as well as leading scholars in Islamic studies and Middle East studies” about the book. According to a press release—and according to John Donatich—these assorted authorities had been unanimous in their recommendation: this book about the Danish cartoons could only be published without the cartoons. It got worse. Professor Inhorn told Professor Klausen that the depictions of Mohammed by Doré and Dalí would also have to go. In fact, Yale was embarking on a new regime of iconoclasm: no representations of that seventh-century religious figure were allowed at all.

The recommendations by those nebulous “authorities” were eventually codified in a fourteen-page memo. Professor Klausen has been read snippets of the memo but hasn’t seen the whole thing because she refused to sign a confidentiality agreement (a “gag order,” she called it) not to reveal its contents or the names of the authorities. Why would Yale insist that she sign a confidentiality agreement?

More to the point, why would the Vice President and Secretary of Yale University, one of Yale’s top corporate officers, be party to that “cup of coffee”? We called Linda Lorimer’s office to find out. Imagine our surprise when she turned out to be unavailable. (Perhaps she is traveling in Saudi Arabia at the moment: Professor Klausen said Ms. Lorimer mentioned over that cup of coffee that she often visited that part of the world.) We were shunted over to Tom Conroy, Deputy Director of Public Affairs at Yale. He, too, was unavailable, but he later emailed a press release and asked that we “consider it Yale’s response to inquiries.” This document shows that Yale is not without a sense of humor, for it solemnly informs readers that Yale is an “institution deeply committed to free expression” while rationalizing a blatant assault upon free expression. Nice work!

The burden of the press release was that the YUP feared it “ran a serious risk of instigating violence” if it published the cartoons or “other illustrations of the Prophet Muhammad.” Writing in Slate, Christopher Hitchens deplored this ignorant—or perhaps it is merely a devious?—misuse of the word “instigate.” One instigates violence by actively encouraging and abetting it, not by engaging in lawful acts of communication. Of course, innocent activities can sometimes spark violence, and not
just from aggrieved Muslims. That is one reason communities maintain a police force.

Yale’s embrace of the new iconoclasm raises other questions. The YUP is one of the biggest producers of art catalogues for the museum world. What happens when some enterprising young curator puts together an exhibition of the work of Gustave Doré? Will he be told that he cannot include that work depicting Mohammed in Hell? What happens when someone wants to do a catalogue raisonné of the work of Salvador Dalí? Will his image of Mohammed be omitted? Ditto on William Blake, Botticelli, Giovanni da Modena, and Rodin, all of whom illustrated that passage from Dante. The Koran forbids any depiction of Mohammed, so what about that bas-relief at the U.S. Supreme Court by Adolph Weinman depicting Mohammed holding a sword? Tricky, isn’t it? But those are questions for another day. The proximate question is: who got the censorship ball rolling at Yale? The fact that the Secretary of the University got involved suggests that the administration itself, i.e., the office of President Richard C. Levin, was party to the decision. We called Mr. Levin’s office. No response. We called and emailed John Donatich to ask him. Again, no response.

A few further points. It turns out that the recommendation to purge the images from Professor Klausen’s book was not “unanimous,” as Mr. Donatich, the YUP (and, incidentally, The New York Times) had claimed. In August, The Guardian reported that

Sheila Blair, professor of Islamic and Asian art at [Boston College] and one of the authorities consulted by Yale about publication, said she had “strongly urged” the press to publish the images. “To deny that such images were made is to distort the historical record and to bow to the biased view of some modern zealots who would deny that others at other times and places perceived and illustrated Muhammad in different ways,” she wrote in a letter to The New York Times which is yet to be published.

As of this writing, the Times still has not run Professor Blair’s letter nor have they published a correction to their original story about the episode.

That story in the Times implied that, in its appeal to experts, the University and/or the YUP was exercising normal caution. But that can’t be right. They had already thoroughly vetted the book for scholarly substance and legal integrity. Why, then, would Yale call in another “two dozen authorities” on the veritable eve of publication?

And who, by the way, were these experts? Yale isn’t saying. Since they mentioned “experts in the intelligence, national security” and diplomatic fields, it would make sense that one of them might be John Negroponte. Recently appointed a fellow to Yale’s MacMillan Center, Ambassador Negroponte is a former Director of National Intelligence, a former United States Deputy Secretary of State, and former U.S. Ambassador to Honduras, the U.N., and Iraq. The Ambassador’s office was pointed in its response of “no comment” to our queries. But anyone who has followed the State Department’s efforts to mollify Muslims and have its employees avoid terms like “jihad,” “mujahdeen,” and
“Islamo-fascism” would naturally surmise that John Negroponte was one of the experts consulted. He could be counted on to deliver the desired verdict.

And here’s another question. Professor Blair confirmed that she was contacted not by the YUP but by the “Office of the President.” She spoke with an assistant to President Richard C. Levin. Professor Blair declined to speculate about the significance of that fact. We will not be so chary. We strongly suspect that the threats-of-violence trope was a pretext or, at most, a subsidiary concern for Yale. What was the real reason that Yale was so anxious to bowdlerize Professor Klausen’s book? Yale has been ostentatiously unforthcoming, so we are left to speculate. We’d speculate that there were several reasons. Some part of the reason—about 20 percent, say—is probably good old liberal capitulation to the forces of intimidation. It’s advanced a few steps in the case of Yale since here the capitulation was entirely preemptive: there were no threats or warnings, merely anticipatory cravenness.

Well, not only cravenness. We suspect there was a large element of calculation mixed in. Yale isn’t talking, but anyone who wished to follow up on this distasteful episode might wish to inquire about the following: 1. We have learned that one of John Donatich’s pet projects at the YUP is an elaborate (and expensive) online version of the Koran. Apparently, he and Linda Lorimer have traveled often to the Middle East to raise money for this project. How did concern for that project figure into the decision to bowdlerize Professor Klausen’s book? 2. An uncomfortable truth: Richard Levin has contributed nothing to Yale’s intellectual endowment. His mantra is “globalization,” not scholarship. Remember the slogan “For God, for Country, and for Yale”? The university quietly jettisoned God some time ago. Under President Levin, the commitment to country is rapidly disappearing, too. Yale, like many other prominent universities, is on the threshold of shedding its American identity and becoming part of the transnational progressive brotherhood, for whom “patriotism” is a dirty word and politically correct “multiculturalism” is the rallying cry. It would be illuminating to inquire into Yale’s financial ambitions in the Arab world and to ask what bearing they had on President Levin’s extraordinary interference in the publication of a scholarly book. One thing is certain: Yale no longer lives up to the motto lux et veritas. Timiditas et deditio—cowardice and surrender—is now the order of the day.