

the fear of Islam

an introduction to
Islamophobia in the West



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Professional Islamophobia

As objects of suspicion if not overt hostility, Muslims often cannot speak for themselves to Western audiences or, perhaps more accurately, are not heard when they do speak. They lack the power to control the public narrative of Islam. We have already seen how prominent politicians drive negative views of Islam in the context of foreign political and military endeavors as well as domestic security. We have also encountered examples of the media dictating the narrative of Islam in light of key events such as the Danish cartoon controversy, though a more thorough analysis of the media's portrayal of Muslims will take place in the next chapter.

In this chapter, I analyze the arguments, motivations, and influence of prominent individuals and organizations that deliberately drown out the diversity of Muslim voices and consciously manufacture and exploit the fear of Islam in a manner unprecedented in mainstream political and media circles. I refer to this enterprise as "professional Islamophobia." Professional Islamophobia is constituted by a cadre of conservative politicians, right-wing activists and bloggers, and

even disgruntled Muslims or ex-Muslims who make a career of demonizing Muslims and Arabs. Nathan Lean refers to this cadre as the “Islamophobia Industry,” whereas the Center for American Progress labels it the “Islamophobia Network.”¹ Whatever we call it, what matters is that those who participate in and profit from professional Islamophobia have powerful political, media, and publishing platforms from which to generate and exacerbate Western anxieties toward the Muslim “Other.”

Far Right Activists and Bloggers in the United States

In the post-9/11 era, a host of far right academics, activists, and bloggers have emerged and become prominent voices in US debates about Islam. Three individuals in particular—Daniel Pipes, Pamela Geller, and Robert Spencer—have made a huge impact on the misinformation about Islam that circulates so freely on the Internet, in the media, and in political circles.

Daniel Pipes

The most prominent of the three, and the one who was already a known commodity in far right circles prior to 9/11, is Daniel Pipes.² Pipes received a PhD in medieval Islamic history from Princeton University in 1978. He entered government service in the early 1980s, serving on the policy planning staff for the US State Department. He also tried his hand at university teaching, but he left the academic world permanently in 1986 and entered the world of

1. Nathan Lean, *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims* (London: Pluto, 2012); Ali Wajahat et al., *Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2011).

2. For a brief biography of Daniel Pipes, see Eyal Press, “Neocon Man,” *Nation*, May 10, 2004, <http://www.thenation.com/article/neocon-man>.

political think tanks, directing the Foreign Policy Research Institute from 1986 to 1993 and then assuming the leadership of the Middle East Forum in 1994. Pipes established the Middle East Forum to foster a conservative response to perceived threats to US interests in the Middle East.

Pipes authored numerous books and articles prior to 9/11. His most famous, "The Muslims Are Coming! The Muslims Are Coming!," was published by the *National Review* in 1990. In it, he argued that "West European societies are unprepared for the massive immigration of brown-skinned peoples cooking strange foods and not exactly maintaining Germanic standards of hygiene."³

His political and cultural influence rose significantly after 9/11. In the year following the attacks, he appeared on 450 radio shows and 110 television programs and wrote op-ed pieces for prominent newspapers.⁴ In 2002, he solidified his public reputation as an "expert" on Islamic terrorism with his book *Militant Islam Reaches America*. In the book, he argues that Muslim Americans present a serious threat to

Daniel Pipes (1949–) is a former academic who heads the Middle East Forum, a conservative think tank that is highly critical of Islam and of the academic study of the Middle East in American universities. Pipes created a website in 2002 called Campus Watch in order to keep track of professors whose approach to Middle East studies did not align with his conservative position.

3. Daniel Pipes, "The Muslims Are Coming! The Muslims Are Coming!," *National Review*, November 19, 1990, <http://www.danielpipes.org/198/the-muslims-are-coming-the-muslims-are-coming>.

4. Press, "Neocon Man."

the United States because they are sympathetic with the goals of al-Qaeda.⁵ In 2003, Pipes received an appointment to the US Institute of Peace from President Bush, despite numerous objections from politicians and organizations who feared that Pipes was more committed to conflict than to peace with Muslims and Muslim-majority countries.

Pipes used his post-9/11 status to create the Campus Watch website in 2002.⁶ The purpose of the site was to keep track of so-called activist scholars on US college campuses whose views on the Middle East did not align with a neoconservative perspective. He wanted to ostracize scholars critical of US foreign policy in the Middle East, including the case for war in Iraq, and of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Pipes even encouraged students to report "problematic" professors to the website. In September 2002, the site posted the dossiers of eight "suspect" scholars. When news of this blacklist became known, over one hundred scholars contacted the Middle East Forum and asked to be added to the Campus Watch list in an act of solidarity. The list was removed by the end of the month, at least in part as a result of criticisms that Pipes was engaged in McCarthyism.

In many ways, Pipes is the figurehead of professional Islamophobia in the United States, though, unsurprisingly, he rejects the very concept of Islamophobia. He asks, "What constitutes an 'undue fear of Islam' when Muslims in the name of Islam today make up the premier source of worldwide aggression?" He encourages Muslims to discard the term and to stop blaming "the potential victim for fearing his would-be executioner."⁷ In other words, Pipes insists that because

5. Daniel Pipes, *Militant Islam Reaches America* (New York: Norton, 2002).

6. For an overview of *Campus Watch*, see Kristine McNeil, "The War on Academic Freedom," *The Nation*, November 25, 2002, <http://www.thenation.com/article/war-academic-freedom>.

7. Daniel Pipes, "Islamophobia?," *New York Sun*, October 25, 2005, <http://www.danielpipes.org/3075/islamophobia>.

Muslims worldwide pose an existential threat to everyone else, the Western fear of Muslims is completely justified.

Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer

Whereas Pipes's reputation as a harsh critic of Muslims antedated 9/11, others engaged in professional Islamophobia owe their careers solely to 9/11 and its aftermath. Two clear examples are Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer. Geller, a native of New York City, spent her early career working first as a financial analyst and later as a publisher and columnist for newspapers in the city. After 9/11, she entered the professional Islamophobia business, launching the website *Atlas Shrugs* in 2005. The website focused on drawing attention to the dangers of Islam.

Spencer, like Pipes, has some academic training in religion. He received his MA in religious studies from the University of North Carolina in 1986, though his focus was on early Christian history, not Islam. He taught some years at a Catholic high school in the Bronx before assuming the mantle of public intellectual after 9/11.⁸ His breakthrough book, *Islam Unveiled* (2003), gave Spencer the chance to claim expertise in Islam and to warn of the dangers Islam posed to the United States in light of the religion's inherent violence, backwardness, and misogyny.⁹ He has continued to author and coauthor books with incendiary titles, including *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion* (2007), *Stealth Jihad: How Radical Islam Is Subverting America without Guns or Bombs* (2008), and *The Complete Infidel's Guide to the Koran* (2009). He has made the rounds on US and European news programs and

8. Lean, *Islamophobia Industry*, 58.

9. Robert Spencer, *Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions about the World's Fastest-Growing Faith* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003).