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School editors say they were suspended for running Islamic cartoons

By David Mendell
Tribune staff reporter
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The editor in chief of a student-led newspaper serving the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has been suspended for printing cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad that, when published in Europe, enraged Muslims and led to violent protests in the Middle East and Asia.

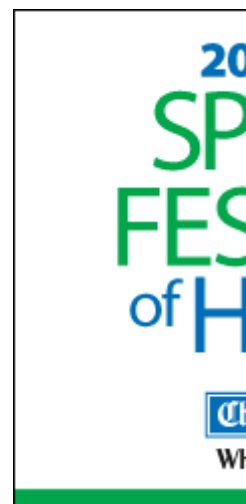
Editor Acton Gorton and his opinions editor, Chuck Prochaska, were relieved of their duties at The Daily Illini on Tuesday while a task force investigates "the internal decision-making and communication" that led to the publishing of the cartoons, according to a statement by the newspaper's publisher and general manager, Mary Cory.

Gorton said he expects to be fired at the conclusion of the investigation, which is expected to take two weeks.

"I pretty much have an idea how this is going to run, and this is a thinly veiled attempt to remove me from my position," said Gorton, a U. of I. senior who took the newspaper's helm Jan. 1. "I am feeling very betrayed, and I feel like the people who I thought were my friends and supporters didn't back me up."

Nearly every major U.S. newspaper, including the Chicago Tribune, has not published the cartoons. They were first published in late September by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten and reprinted in other European publications in recent weeks. The cartoons portray the prophet as a terrorist, including one that depicts Muhammad wearing a turban shaped as a bomb and another showing him turning away suicide bombers from paradise because, he says, heaven ran out of virgins to be given to martyrs.

Gorton, 25, said he believes he made a sound journalistic decision in running six of the cartoons because the public has a right to judge their content. He said he consulted with top staff members and journalism



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instructors before making the decision to publish them in Thursday's newspaper.

"This is not a publicity stunt, and this wasn't an easy decision," said Gorton, who said he spent three years in the Army as a medic and paratrooper before college. "I was stressed and couldn't sleep at night. But I just felt it was an important issue to address in the newspaper."

Gorton's decision, however, caused an uproar in the local Muslim community and rankled other Illini staff members after the paper was deluged with negative letters and e-mails.

Gorton himself said he received 300 e-mails. Two-thirds of the e-mails were supportive and a third were hateful, he said.

U. of I. Chancellor Richard Herman also wrote a letter to the newspaper saying he was saddened by Gorton's decision.

Then, on Monday, the paper ran an editorial apologizing for Gorton's decision and called the move "a blatant abuse of power" by a "renegade editor who firmly believes that his will is also the will of the paper."

The task force will study whether Gorton made his decision in a vacuum that was improper according to the Illini's journalistic standards, written in 1947. The Daily Illini is an independent publication that serves the university community and is overseen by a board of directors that includes students and faculty.

"The board and publisher reaffirm that final decisions about content in The Daily Illini rest with the editor in chief," Cory said in a written statement. "But the board and publisher also recognize that journalistic norms regarding professional behavior dictate that it is the editor's obligation to engage other student editors and student staff members in rigorous discussion and debate of sensitive content."

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