

Illustration of Obama in rifle crosshairs draws fire

'Roswell Beacon' distributed to 65,000 north Fulton readers

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A Roswell newspaper is defending a controversial cover illustration that placed Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama in a rifle's cross hairs.

An influential liberal blog featured a post Tuesday on the provocative cover art, triggering a flood of complaints to the Roswell Beacon, a nascent free weekly distributed to about 65,000 north Fulton residents. The article was published May 15th.

A diarist named "spiralstairs" wrote on Daily Kos, "The article itself is not offensive, but the cover is beyond the pale. As indicated by the article, there are some serious racists in the area, and Obama's candidacy has brought out the worst in a lot of people. The last thing we need is a newspaper to suggest assassination with an incendiary cover such as this."

Readers — Kos receives more than 1.3 million visits a day, according to sitemeter.com — were encouraged to contact the newspaper and its advertisers. By day's end, Holiday Inn announced it would no longer do business with the Beacon, though the paper's publisher, John Fredericks, said editorial decisions would not be influenced by "liberal blogger thuggery."

"Good, bad or ugly, we tell the truth," he said.

Fredericks and senior editor Tim Altork said there was little internal debate over the appropriateness of the imagery, though they were aware it was likely to create a stir.

"We knew we were on the provocative edge," Altork said. "But it's a very fair piece, a smart piece."

The article was pitched and reported by veteran freelance journalist Alan Sverdlik, who said he was curious how law enforcement agencies were handling the increased number of threats lodged against Obama by white supremacist groups, some of whom are based around north Fulton. Sverdlik said Tuesday he had not seen the cover and had no input in its development.

The Beacon's publisher said the art "projected the story," one which he believes serves a valuable public interest: "We're hoping federal law enforcement takes notice."

So far, however, the content inside has been obscured by the furor over its illustration.

"Their slogan is 'responsibly provocative,'" wrote Miami teacher Rian Fike. "This is irresponsibly inflammatory."

And poorly timed, though The Beacon can't be held accountable on that front. The article's publication coincided with an ill-advised quip by former Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee after a loud noise interrupted his speech to the National Rifle Association.

"That was Barack Obama," Huckabee said. "He just tripped off a chair. He's getting ready to speak and somebody aimed a gun at him and he — he dove for the floor."

The former Arkansas governor apologized for the comment, though it reminded many of concerns that Obama's race might tempt more would-be assassins. "That was a bad break for us," Altork said.

At the same time, just a few miles away west of Roswell, a Cobb County saloonkeeper was exalting in his own Obama-related controversy, peddling T-shirts featuring a cartoon monkey endorsing the likely Democratic nominee.

"He (the bar owner) was making a statement," Altork said. "We were reporting what others were saying. This was not a publicity stunt."