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Tom Toles

CHANNELING OUTRAGE

CARTOONIST TOM TOLES KEEPS HIS PENCILS SHARP

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With his angular face and shoulder-length red hair—a frizzy mane that hasn't been touched by scissors in a year and a half—Tom Toles, 63, looks a little like a lion.

On this snowy February evening, the Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist for The Washington Post is one of four UB alumni in the news media participating in a

panel discussion at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. In attendance are 70 other UB alumni. Many have come for Toles (BA '73), and they won't leave disappointed. Some are laughing so hard at his wry comments they seem nearly unhinged.

But if Toles is having the same effect on this audience that he has on his readers, it stands to reason that some here are doing a slow burn. Sure enough, midway through the program, a 1956 med school alumnus in the second row starts jawing with Toles about Bill O'Reilly and his recently disproven claims to have reported from war zones. The man believes O'Reilly is telling the truth and is utterly unmoved by evidence to the contrary unearthed by a Village Voice reporter—and Toles can't let it go.

"You can shake and nod your head any way you want," the cartoonist says, "but he reported what Bill O'Reilly actually said and could prove it."

As a political cartoonist, moral outrage is Toles' currency. "I am infuriated by many things," he says. "Top among them is the way we've botched the climate challenge. This one was our responsibility, and we dropped the ball."

The outrage works both ways. A woman once wrote to Toles: "I happen to think Mr. Bush is a fine-looking man and your portrait of him makes him look like some kind of little animal. I think it is highly disrespectful of you to do this. His ears are on his head in the same place as everyone else's."

This winter the outrage that circulates around political cartooning spiraled out of control, ending in the shooting deaths of French journalists at Charlie Hebdo for the perceived blasphemy of their cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Nobody should be killed for expressing a view, Toles says. But what happened does raise secondary questions about journalistic wisdom and worth. The history of political cartooning isn't without, as he puts it, "bad actors spreading hate."

On the day of the media panel, Toles catches the first train into the city, a 10-minute ride. Soon he'll have a different morning routine. He'll be back in Buffalo per an agreement with the Post allowing him to work summers in his hometown. He and his wife, Gretchen (BA '73), love Buffalo, he says. "There's just something kind of lovable about it. The way people are in a snowstorm—they drop what they're doing and help each other get through it."

It would appear that Toles' vision of the world and how it ought to be—a vision that says much about what and whom he takes issue with—is informed at least in part by his upbringing in the City of Good Neighbors. In his office, several hours before the panel, he is taking issue with the minimum wage, inking in a cartoon depicting one of the Wicked Witch's guards telling Dorothy: "The wicked 1% hired me at

minimum wage to guard her castle. The bucket of water is on the wall under the torches.”

As Toles works, cars shush along the wet surface of 15th Street four stories beneath his window. The Rapidograph in his long, slender fingers makes a soft scratching noise on the paper like the lick of a switchblade.