

After New York governor bars “Freedom Center”

Plans for World Trade Center site in disarray

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20 October 2005

More than four years after the September 11 attacks that destroyed New York City’s World Trade Center and had a devastating impact on the city’s entire downtown business district, plans for the revival of the area are in a state of growing disarray.

The ruling elite in the US financial capital is increasingly divided over the future of the World Trade Center site, a fact which was highlighted by New York Governor George Pataki’s decision last month to bar the International Freedom Center from the site. The Freedom Center was originally proposed more than three years ago, and until recently Pataki was full of praise for the idea, which was supposed to portray the September 11 attacks as a blow against America and its role as a “beacon” of freedom around the world.

The man behind the Freedom Center was Tom Bernstein, one of the owners of the Chelsea Piers entertainment complex in Manhattan. Bernstein’s partner in Chelsea Piers is Roland Betts, an old friend of George W. Bush. Both Bernstein and Betts were co-owners, with Bush, of the Texas Rangers baseball team. To understand how this well-connected member of the New York business and cultural establishment failed in his project for the new “Freedom” museum, it is necessary to examine the chain of events which followed September 11, 2001.

The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), chaired by John C. Whitehead, former senior partner of Goldman Sachs and former deputy secretary of state in the Reagan administration, was established soon after September 11 to oversee the rebuilding of the area. The project was to include new skyscrapers with up to 10 million square feet of office and retail space, as well as space dedicated to a memorial to the nearly 3,000 people who died in the attacks.

From the outset there was tension between the demands for office space and the feelings of the families of those who died at the World Trade Center. Many family members complained regularly that they felt overlooked amidst the plans for commercial revival and multibillion-dollar construction projects, including a 1,776-foot “Freedom Tower” office building.

Architect Daniel Libeskind’s master plan for the site was conceived as a means of bridging the gulf between the memorial and business elements of the reconstruction, through cultural buildings and activities. The Freedom Center, as a museum that would supposedly provide for reflection on the events of September 11, became a major focus of these plans. Existing cultural institutions in New York, including the Drawing Center,

the Signature Theater Company and the Joyce International Dance Company, representing the areas of art, theater and dance, respectively, were also included.

The elimination of the Freedom Center, following the earlier departure of the Drawing Center, places a very big question mark over what the cultural component of the redeveloped World Trade Center site is going to look like, or whether it will even exist. Moreover, there is also growing concern about the projected office space. Plans for the massive Freedom Tower are being amended after police raised security concerns about the design. Goldman Sachs cancelled plans to build its headquarters next to the site. And business sources are expressing concern that “the market isn’t there right now for that much commercial space in Lower Manhattan,” in the words of a spokesman for the Regional Plan Association.

From the very beginning, the Freedom Center was part and parcel of the official propaganda myth which portrayed the events of September 11 as some kind of nearly inexplicable eruption of “evil.” It was designed, in line with the so-called global war on terror, to explain the role of the United States as the courageous defender of freedom, under attack by the forces of terror and tyranny.

An indication of the political character of the Freedom Center was the presence, among its directors, of Natan Sharansky, the former Soviet refusenik turned right-wing Israeli politician, a man who has been welcomed to the White House as an ideological soulmate of President Bush.

At the same time, under the guidance of the New York political and business establishment, the Freedom Center sought to couch its depiction of the September 11 attacks in liberal-sounding platitudes. The forces behind the Freedom Center no doubt felt more comfortable presenting the case for the war against terrorism with a liberal gloss. In February 2004, for instance, the LMDC issued a statement referring to “the World Trade Center site as a place for inquiry and discussion,” with programming that “could highlight the values of tolerance, diversity and understanding among nations.”

There were elements within the Republican right for whom this kind of “multilateralism” was a red flag. They took advantage of the fact that many of the World Trade Center families felt increasingly alienated from the project. The families were never seriously consulted, but many could sense that the deaths of their loved ones were being used as a political prop.

The ultra right was able to exploit this uneasiness through the intervention of Debra Burlingame, whose brother was the pilot of the airline that was crashed into the Pentagon on September 11. Ms. Burlingame wrote a column entitled, “The Great Ground Zero Heist,” which was published in the *Wall Street Journal* last June.

The attack, quickly taken up by Rupert Murdoch’s *New York Post* and other voices of the right, as well as the officials of New York City’s police and fire unions, denounced the Freedom Center from the standpoint of American chauvinism. When the Freedom Center explained that it planned to include exhibits focusing on sympathetic reaction around the world in the face of the carnage on September 11, Burlingame and her associates were livid, ridiculing the idea that Americans would be subjected to these views of “outsiders” and saying this was tantamount to permitting and sponsoring “anti-American” ideas.

Also under attack was the Drawing Center, which was originally to share the same building with the Freedom Center. This well-respected arts institution has been around for 28 years. The critics were not interested in its reputation for seriousness and quality, however. They discovered that a recent Drawing Center exhibit had included, among other images, a hooded figure holding a barbed-wire chain spelling out the word liberty, a clear reference to the Abu Ghraib prison abuse revelations.

Governor Pataki, the intellectual cipher who has served as the Republican Governor of New York for over a decade and is reportedly considering a run for the presidency in 2008, responded to the attacks on the Drawing Center and Freedom Center by demanding that the institutions agree to political self-censorship by providing an “absolute guarantee” that they would do nothing to “denigrate America.”

The Drawing Center, recognizing that such a blanket promise was impossible, announced that it would look for other facilities in the downtown area. The Freedom Center attempted to comply with the demand. It did not, needless to say, point out that the “denigration of America” was symbolized above all by the Abu Ghraib torture and its inspirers in the Bush administration. On the contrary, it issued a letter last July that pledged that the museum would never “be used as a forum for denigrating the country we love.”

The attempt to appease its critics had little effect, however, and Pataki’s announcement, declaring that the proposed museum had provoked “too much controversy,” was not a big surprise. The governor called on the LMDC to “work with the IFC to explore other locations,” but the Freedom Center turned down this suggestion immediately, stating, “We do not believe there is a viable alternative place for the IFC at the World Trade Center site. We consider our work, therefore, to have been brought to an end.”

The embarrassing demise of the project that was first presented three years ago caused some consternation in political circles. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg issued a statement expressing regret while refusing to criticize Pataki or anyone else. Agnes Gund, former president of the Museum of Modern Art and a member of the World Trade Center Memorial Foundation board, resigned with an angry statement declaring, “I am afraid that the governor and those few family members have succeeded in destroying what could not be destroyed on that awful Tuesday

[September 11], which is our hope.”

At its monthly meeting in early October, Whitehead and most of the rest of the members of the LMDC joined in criticizing Pataki’s move, which, among other consequences, calls into question whether any future decisions of this supervisory council can be taken seriously.

The fiasco over the World Trade Center site reveals much about the current political and economic crisis of the US as a whole. The unstable economic upswing is based on the unsustainable buildup of both consumer and government debt. Even while economic indices continue to point generally upward, there is little demand for additional office space.

Just as crucially, the disarray about the Freedom Center and what will replace it at the downtown site reflects the political bankruptcy of the entire ruling elite. The more “liberal” or “mainstream” elements stand with the Bush administration in its endless war in Iraq and its attacks on democratic rights and civil liberties. That is why the movers and shakers, so accustomed to getting their way, found themselves helpless in the face of the chauvinist attacks launched against the Freedom Center.

They cannot answer the ultra right, and they cannot, above all, explain the real significance of September 11. As the governor admitted, the subject is too “controversial.” Among those calling for the barring of the Freedom Center from the WTC site was New York Senator Hillary Clinton, considered a leading candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008.

These developments show the colossal gulf between the masses of working people on one side, and all factions and representatives of the ruling establishment on the other. One fact in particular bears this out. A poll taken not too long ago by the well-known Zogby International firm reported that 49 percent of New Yorkers believe that US officials knew about the September 11 attacks in advance and “consciously failed” to act. As in the case of the tens of millions who want the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, these are views that can find no expression among the politicians of the Democratic and Republican parties, the mass media or the establishment’s cultural spokesmen.



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