

Plan for mosque near Ground Zero a target of anti-Muslim chauvinism

Clare Hurley
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Plans to build an Islamic community center two blocks from Ground Zero in New York City were met with a virulent anti-Muslim crusade orchestrated by the Republican right. The proposal for Cordoba House, a 13-story complex to include a pool, classrooms and an auditorium, in addition to a mosque and a 9/11 memorial, has become the subject of a nationwide hate campaign featuring leading figures in the Republican Party.

Invoking the site of the September 11 terrorist attack as “sacred ground”, these elements have launched a campaign of lies and obstruction to whip up anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments.

The provocation over the “Ground Zero mosque” is based on distortions as to both its location and the character of the proposed project. The community center is not in fact to be located at Ground Zero—the site of the demolished World Trade Center towers—but in a vacant warehouse previously used as a Burlington Coat Factory outlet two blocks north. The controversy is the most recent in a series of incidents nationwide, including one in nearby Staten Island, in which the building of mosques, a guaranteed constitutional right under the First Amendment’s freedom of religion, has been opposed for reactionary reasons.

Muslims are the fastest growing population group worldwide, and although the overall number of Muslims in the United States is a matter of contention, immigration and population growth have made them one of the fastest growing groups in New York state, where they represent an estimated 4.7 percent of the population, mostly concentrated in urban areas and New York City.

While the Jewish population is roughly twice that of Muslims in the city, there are at least eight times as many synagogues as mosques.

The present campaign against the mosque in downtown Manhattan has been mobilized, and financed, on a national scale by the various sections of the Republican right wing, who have backed one obstruction after another.

When the Cordoba Institute’s proposal was approved by the local community board in a vote of 29 to 1, with 10 abstentions, opponents moved to have the vote postponed, even though the proposal would have still passed by a margin of 2 to 1 if all abstentions had been counted against it. When that failed, they moved to have the dilapidated warehouse, which had been slated for demolition, declared a historic landmark by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission.

When the Landmarks Commission voted 9 to 0 last Tuesday

against granting landmark status to the building, the ruling was immediately challenged in court by The American Center for Law and Justice, a legal front founded by Christian right leader Pat Robertson.

The familiar modus operandi of these reactionary figures has swung into full gear. Anti-Muslim chauvinism has been whipped up across the country at rallies addressed by figures such as Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin.

Palin twittered, “Ground Zero Mosque supporters: doesn’t it stab you in the heart, as it does ours throughout the heartland? Peaceful Muslims, pls refudiate.” She corrected herself to say “repudiate”. Presumably, she was referring to plans for the mosque, although it may have been to Islam itself. Her “with us or against us” rhetoric is clear, if ungrammatical.

Several Republican candidates have based their platforms in the run up to the 2010 mid-term elections on the issue. North Carolina Republican candidate Ilario Pantano leads the pack. Former Marine and Persian Gulf War veteran, Pantano was working as a Wall Street trader for Goldman Sachs when the attacks on the World Trade Center took place. A desire to hit back at the “Islamofascist jihadists” led to his re-enlistment for service in Iraq. There his military career ended with his being charged with murdering two Iraqis in his custody near Mahmudiya in April 2004, although the military failed to prosecute.

Pantano has drummed up anti-Muslim racism in a rural district in North Carolina, 600 miles away from Ground Zero—where there are probably few Muslims, but where the brunt of the economic bailout of Goldman Sachs and Wall Street is felt—to further his campaign. He showed up at the Manhattan community board hearings, calling the mosque a “Martyr-Marker” and charging those who have endorsed the plan, including New York’s billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, with aiding and abetting terrorism.

However, Pantano is not alone. Republican New York gubernatorial challenger Rick Lazio has sought to make political hay by opposing it, challenging Democrat Attorney General Andrew Cuomo to investigate the Cordoba Institute’s finances. Other right-wing outfits have charged the Institute with ties to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), with the Free Gaza movement, and with Hamas on specious grounds.

Right-wing media outfits from Fox News to bloggers like Andrew Breitbart have lent their services in disseminating and amplifying this bigotry. The National Republican Trust Political

Action Committee which specializes in attack ads on behalf of Republican right candidates, recently tried to run an anti-mosque ad on TV that was barred as a defamation of Muslims around the world.

While the campaign against the mosque may be led by the ultra-right, the Democratic Party is once again complicit. Not a single prominent Democrat leader, from New York Senator Charles Schumer, who would only say he was “not opposed” to the plan, to Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Majority leader Harry Reid, has come to the defense of the Muslim community.

President Obama refused to take a position, saying through press secretary Robert Gibbs at his regular press briefing last Tuesday, “we are not at war with a religion but with an idea that has corrupted a religion. But that having been said, I’m not from here going to get involved in local decision-making like that.”

As the participation of Gingrich, Palin and candidates like Pantano—not to mention the institutions and media outlets of the Republican right—make clear, this issue is anything but local and involves core constitutional rights.

Those few in the Democratic political establishment who are willing to come out in support of the development have done so spinelessly. Spokesman for NY Representative Jerold Nadler, whose district includes Ground Zero, would only say that while supporting the development, Rep. Nadler did not want to “get involved.”

Democratic Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick is considered the most willing to go out on a limb by saying in a radio interview, “The sooner we separate the peaceful teaching of Islam from the behavior of terrorists, the better for all of us.” Governor Patrick is just back from a tour of Iraq and Afghanistan—undertaken with several Republican governors, including Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota—where he expressed his support for General Petraeus’ “gloves off” campaign against the Taliban and “the even bigger commitment over time” that will be involved.

Another vocal defender of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Mayor Bloomberg has opposed the campaign against the Cordoba Center, arguing that a show of tolerance would strengthen Washington’s hand in the “global war on terror” and acknowledging that blocking the development of private property as a mosque would be a violation of the separation of church and state and would be overruled in court.

Also weighing in on the mosque controversy is the Anti-Defamation League, whose tradition of defending civil rights has long been compromised by its support of Zionism. It announced recently, “In our judgment, building an Islamic Center in the shadow of the World Trade Center will cause some victims more pain—unnecessarily—and that is not right.”

While the grief and anger of the 9/11 families is justified, its exploitation to reactionary ends under present circumstances must be condemned. Those who lost loved ones or were otherwise harmed that day almost nine years ago have received no credible accounting for how a handful of terrorists, many of them were under close US government surveillance, were allowed to hijack planes and fly them into the World Trade Center, killing almost 3,000 people.

Instead, the attacks have been invoked relentlessly by the Bush,

and now the Obama administration, to justify two wars of aggression, wholesale militarism, and attacks on democratic rights. In seeking to separate, as Obama put it, “a war against religion from a war against an idea that corrupted a religion,” the administration has re-avowed its full commitment to the “war on terror” and signaled that it will continue and be intensified. The growing slaughter of innocent civilians will be the result.

While the political representatives of the ruling elite never tire of exploiting 9/11 for political purposes, their real attitude toward the supposed “sacred ground” in New York City is quite another matter. Nearly nine years after the attacks, the 16-acre World Trade Center site remains a vast construction area. Plans for the much-ballyhooed Freedom Tower, the Reflecting Absence Memorial, and the various arts and cultural centers proposed are nowhere near being completed.

Most have collapsed repeatedly in acrimonious feuds. Only work on the transportation hub and an office tower at One World Trade Center has gone forward, albeit at a tortuously slow pace. The same week that the Cordoba mosque was stonewalled again, the New York establishment celebrated the announcement that media giant Condé Nast is considering becoming a cornerstone tenant when One WTC is completed in 2013.

The *New York Times* gushed, “with the prospect of Anna Wintour, the imperious editor-in-chief of Condé Nast’s *Vogue*, who inspired the novel and film ‘The Devil Wears Prada,’ and Graydon Carter, the bon vivant editor of *Vanity Fair*, stepping out of black limousines at ground zero ... we will have the best-paid bankers and best-dressed editors across the street from each other.”

After an economic crisis that has enabled the transfer of even more money into their “best-dressed and best-paid” lifestyles at the expense of millions of workers and their families who face destitution, these self-designated “masters of the universe” would rather not have to resort to the extreme right-wing to preserve their privileges. So far they have been able to count on the Obama administration to protect it with bailouts paid for by austerity measures.

However, with tensions building up to explosive levels, all sections of the ruling elite are determined to defend their system from any challenge from the working class. To this end, they employ the semi-fascist elements and their anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant bigotry with the aim of diverting rising popular anger into reactionary channels.



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