

The “Ground Zero mosque”: Obama cowers before right-wing hysteria

Bill Van Auken
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With the US mid-term elections less than three months away, the issue that has become the focus of this campaign season is a telling indicator of the intensely reactionary character of official politics in America and of both big business parties.

Employing unbridled hypocrisy and cynicism, right-wing forces centered in the Republican Party, but aided and abetted by leading Democrats, have attempted to whip up mob hysteria against a proposed Islamic cultural center that has been approved by local authorities for construction in lower Manhattan.

The center, the Cordoba House, is to include a swimming pool, a gym, an arts center and a memorial to the victims of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. While its supporters have stressed its inter-faith character, it has been almost universally dubbed the “Ground Zero mosque.”

Semi-fascist elements have denounced the proposed center—to be built two and a half blocks from where New York City’s World Trade Center once stood—as a desecration of the “sacred ground” where over 2,700 people were killed on 9/11. Former House Speaker and likely contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012 Newt Gingrich has compared the backers of the project to Nazis protesting outside the Holocaust museum.

The reality is that, nearly nine years after the attacks, the former World Trade Center largely remains a hole in the ground, a sprawling construction site in which little has been built. No memorial has been erected to those who died, as real estate developers and government officials have haggled year after year over financial terms.

Within roughly the same walking distance from this “sacred ground,” one passes strip joints, porn shops, betting parlors and dance clubs, none of which appear to have wounded the sensibilities of these patriotic defenders of the sanctity of Ground Zero. The center itself is to take the place of a dilapidated warehouse, previously the site of a Burlington Coat Factory outlet.

The real aims of those attacking the Cordoba House are not the protection of the nonexistent sanctity of Ground Zero

or the shielding of the sensibilities of 9/11 victims’ families. It is a vicious attempt to foment and exploit religious bigotry, xenophobia and outright racism to drive politics ever further to the right.

The far-reaching implications of this campaign entail an assault on the First Amendment of the US Constitution, guaranteeing freedom of speech and religion and barring the government from establishing a state religion or lending preference to one religion over another. This includes the right of Muslims, or any other religious minority, to worship how and where they choose, without the interference of the government or other religious institutions. The “Ground Zero mosque” campaign is consciously directed at mobilizing elements of the religious right that reject this principle.

It is entirely in sync with a parallel attempt to foment mass hysteria over immigration, portraying immigrants as a criminal class responsible for the loss of jobs and social services. Increasingly, this campaign has embraced the demand for the repeal of the US Constitution’s 14th Amendment—which guarantees citizenship to every person born in the US—in order to clear the way for the deportation of millions of children born in the US to undocumented immigrants. This amendment is the constitutional foundation of equal protection under the law.

In both cases, the assault on core constitutional principles and democratic rights has been coupled with venomous rhetoric that serves as an incitement to violence against immigrants, racial minorities and Muslims.

For months, the Obama White House refused to comment on the controversy, insisting in the face of an assault on core constitutional principles and a nationwide hate campaign that the dispute was little more than a local zoning matter.

Then, last Friday, Obama delivered a speech to a Ramadan dinner at the White House affirming that “Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center in Lower Manhattan ... This is America. And our commitment to religious freedom must

be unshakeable.”

Within the space of 24 hours—and in the wake of a firestorm of Republican right criticism—Obama demonstrated that his commitment was anything but unshakeable. “I was not commenting and will not comment on the wisdom of making the decision to put a mosque there,” he told reporters. “I was commenting very specifically on the right of people that date back to our founding.”

In other words, Obama’s White House speech was nothing more than a formal recognition of the constitutional rights that he is sworn to defend, upholding them in principle, while refusing to lift a finger in their defense against those who would deny these rights in practice.

Obama’s cowardly retreat was followed by a similar statement from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat, Nevada), who on Monday issued a gutless statement acknowledging that “The First Amendment protects freedom of religion,” while insisting “the mosque should be built someplace else.” Needless to say, the senator did not propose any alternative site, much less offer to have the center built in Nevada.

There is little to distinguish Obama and Reid from Gingrich, Sarah Palin and others on the Republican right, who also formally acknowledge freedom of religion, while demanding that this freedom be denied to Muslims. Both parties are content to turn the Constitution into a dead letter, replacing it with statutes more suited to police-state repression at home and permanent military aggression abroad.

Why did Obama bother giving the speech if he was prepared to repudiate it so quickly? Clearly, it was not motivated by any concern for religious freedom or democratic rights.

The real motivation was suggested in a *Washington Post* column by Michael Gerson, the former speechwriter for George W. Bush, who aptly noted that with his speech and speedy backtracking, “Obama managed to collect all the political damage for taking an unpopular stand without gaining credit for political courage.”

The US president, Gerson continued, was compelled to make such a speech, because he “leads a coalition that includes Iraqi and Afghan Muslims who risk death each day fighting Islamic radicalism at our side. How could he possibly tell them that their place of worship inherently symbolizes the triumph of terror?”

Obama acted not out of commitment to constitutional principles, but rather, in all likelihood, at the prodding of the Pentagon and the US foreign policy establishment. They fear that the anti-Muslim campaign being whipped up by the Republican right could undermine US military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan to affirm Washington’s hegemony in

the overwhelmingly Muslim Middle East and Central Asia, the world’s two most important sources of oil and gas.

Indeed, the principal figure involved in the Cordoba House project, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, plays a direct role in these US efforts. The State Department announced last week that it is sending Rauf on a goodwill tour of the Middle East, the third such mission by the Muslim cleric, with whom the State Department acknowledged having “a long-term relationship.” The Imam has also provided training for the FBI and police agencies in dealing with Muslim populations.

The “Ground Zero mosque” controversy has ensnared the Obama administration in an unavoidable contradiction. On the one hand US imperialism needs to recruit Muslim allies and puppets to further its two ongoing wars, as well as to support aggression against Iran. On the other hand, it has whipped up anti-Muslim sentiment within the general population and among US troops in order to generate religious-based support for these wars.

In the final analysis, the fascistic agitation against the Islamic center in Lower Manhattan, together with the cowering response of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party, demonstrate that militarism and imperialist war abroad coupled with ever-widening social inequality at home are incompatible with democratic rights. The escalating attacks on rights that go back to the founding of the American republic constitute a stark warning. The defense of these rights requires a counteroffensive by the working class against the reactionary social and political forces being mobilized to subvert them and against the profit system that gives rise to these attacks.

Bill Van Auken



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