

Mosque Hysteria

Michael Enright's face betrayed fear and perplexity as he became the tabloid news embodiment of America's sudden binge of Islamophobia after his arrest for attempting to murder a Muslim cabbie in New York. Mr. Enright had returned in April from a short tour of duty in Afghanistan as a videographer for an interfaith group. What demons he brought back with him we will never know, but he appears to have carried them to New York. After an afternoon of heavy drinking on Aug. 23, he hailed a cab, questioned the driver about his religion and then began slashing him with a knife.

Most of the voices that have spoken out against the proposed Park51 community center near ground zero in lower Manhattan will deplore Mr. Enright's attack and then deny that their campaign had anything to do with it. Fair enough. No one will ever be able to say for sure what propelled Mr. Enright. But what the "no mosque" pundits cannot deny is the sour contribution they have made to respectful, rational dialogue in U.S. civic life.

Words have consequences; rhetoric is not disconnected from action. Mr. Enright may be unbalanced, and what little self-restraint he possessed may have been broken by alcohol. But civic leaders promoting intolerance and fear cannot offer even these excuses. The voices raised against Park51, formerly called Cordoba House, which would be run by precisely the kind of moderate Islamic leadership the United States should be encouraging, have stirred up an unpleasant neo-nativist brew across the nation.

Initial reaction to Park51 was generally positive. In December 2009 it was described by its founders as a push-back against radical Islam, and it even received a thumbs-up from the conservative personality Laura Ingraham on a Fox News broadcast: "I can't find many people who really have a problem with it," she told a co-founder, Daisy Khan. "I like what you're trying to do." But in May the initiative was discovered by Internet provocateurs who have prospered on Islamophobia. It was not long before political opportunists and assorted talk-radio and cable-TV barkers joined in. "There is no reason for us to accept a mosque next to the World Trade Center," Newt Gingrich said. "Nazis don't have the right to put up a sign next to the Holocaust museum in Washington." "Permits should not be granted to build even one more mosque in the United States of America," Bryan Fischer of the American Family Association wrote, "let alone the monstrosity planned for Ground Zero. This is

for one simple reason: each Islamic mosque is dedicated to the overthrow of the American government."

In May a pipe bomb exploded outside a mosque in Jacksonville, Fla. In August a mosque in California was vandalized, and a suspicious fire broke out at the construction site of an Islamic center in Murfreesboro, Tenn. The heated debate over Park51 has now made home-grown hate a national phenomenon.

A few weeks ago it might have been acceptable for people of good will to support the right of Muslim Americans to practice their faith freely while objecting to the location. But to suggest today, as many have, that this proposed facility is insensitive to the personal loss of so many survivors of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, diminishes the luster of freedom for which 3,000 men and women were killed that day and for which the first responders died.

There are valid rebuttals to the case for impropriety. Park51 is not meant to celebrate the triumph of terrorism, but to confront it; it is a community center, not a mosque; it was intended to promote interfaith relations; it is located blocks from the heart of the World Trade Center site, while businesses and storefronts that hardly honor the sacredness of the suffering and loss experienced at ground zero may be found close by.

But now the ugliness has become widespread. People are being assaulted because of who they are, and constitutionally protected attempts to build mosques are being thwarted out of fear and ignorance. America is beginning to look like the crusading enemy of Islam that Al Qaeda claims it is. Political and religious leaders must cease waffling on this issue and unequivocally support both the right of Muslim citizens to build a place of community and worship—open to all—and the appropriateness of building in proximity to a place where cunning and cruelty took the lives of so many. Park51 can be a counterforce here and abroad to a toxic nativism that is propelling a clash of civilizations most Americans find repugnant. If we allow our worst fears and suspicions to deny Muslim Americans associated with the Cordoba Initiative a chance to do the good work they propose to do at Park51, then we are resigning ourselves and our children to a future of testy relations at home and abroad.



Proposed site of Park51