

The Koran Burning-Islamic Center Brouhaha

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Threats to the First Amendment may be the worst outcome by Ivan Eland

Even in an age of media sensationalism, the intense coverage of the proposed Islamic center at Ground Zero, and a shamelessly bigoted Christian minister's threat to burn the Koran in response to it, are both jolting and saddening.

Neither of these events merited media coverage at all, but in today's world controversy brings larger audiences and thus more revenue through advertisements. The mosque isn't even the first near the "hallowed ground" of Ground Zero, cannot even be seen from that site, and, as the imam of the proposed mosque noted, is in the same neighborhood as not-so-hallowed strip joints and gambling parlors. More important, all of the followers of Islam, a religion that has 1.5 billion adherents worldwide, should not be punished just because nineteen 9/11 hijackers just happened to be Muslim.



Christianity is not blamed for the Nazi Holocaust even though Adolf Hitler was a Catholic, the church looked the other way during the extermination of Jews, the church never excommunicated Hitler, Hitler could not have come to power without the support of the Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany, and Hitler, in his book *Mein Kampf* and in speeches, said that Jesus fought against the "Jewish poison" and that in "defending" against the Jews he was doing Jesus's work. Yet no one alleges that all Christians are bloodthirsty anti-Semites like Hitler, so why should all Muslims be characterized as terrorists after 9/11?

But inferring from his brazen publicity stunt, apparently the Koran-burning minister from Gainesville, Fla., thinks they should be. Yet, with a congregation of only 50, he is not even a major religious leader and so should have been marginalized by the media as an extremist crackpot.

Yet ignorance about or bigotry against Muslims may not be the most troubling aspect of this sorry saga. In fact, the behavior of the Gainesville fire department, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and Gen. David Petraeus may have been more dangerous to the principles of the republic.

The Gainesville fire department unconstitutionally attempted to deny the admittedly obnoxious minister's First Amendment rights by denying him a permit to have a fire when no obvious fire hazard existed. Similar rumblings were heard in New York City about using the zoning laws as an excuse to unconstitutionally deny Muslims the right to build the Islamic center near Ground Zero. Fortunately, that was not done, and Mayor Michael Bloomberg deserves a pat on the back, for rare principled behavior by a politician, in standing up for the right to establish the Islamic center. The Gainesville fire department did not behave so admirably.

Gen. David Petraeus, the U.S. military commander in Afghanistan, stated publicly that the minister's burning of the Muslim holy book would endanger U.S. troops, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made a call to the minister to urge him not to do it for the same reason. Petraeus and Gates may be correct, but then why didn't they make similar statements that pressure to move the proposed Islamic center away from Ground Zero could also pose a threat to American forces? The minister's Koran burning can't endanger U.S. troops overseas any more than repeated non-Muslim U.S. occupation of and intervention in Muslim lands—such meddling in such places as Indonesia, Palestine, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Libya, , Kuwait, Somalia, and Yemen—the major reason for the 9/11 attacks, not Islam.

More important, in a free republic, it is dangerous for high-level government officials to pressure or intimidate private citizens, even subtly, into restricting their constitutionally protected speech (in contrast to laudable opposition to the minister's bigotry by private religious and

community leaders), no matter how vile and prejudiced the speech and no matter how laudable the goal (saving the lives of American troops).

Gates and Petraeus work for President Obama and should have followed his more restrained example. Obama was criticized on the Left for not praising the building of the Islamic center enough. But when Obama said that Muslims had a right to build the center, but then said that he was not endorsing the project, that was about right. Since the U.S. Declaration of Independence said that government was supposed to preserve people's rights rather than take them away and the Constitution's Bill of Rights was designed to effect this principle, Obama's endorsement of the right of Muslims to build the center was justified and needed. But a president's or government's job is not to decide which type of speech or religious observance is good or bad; in fact, that itself would set a bad example.

Some people may not like the building of an Islamic center near Ground Zero or appreciate the political statement of a bigoted Christian minister, but, in both cases, the First Amendment rights of freedom of religion and speech need to be respected.

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
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