

'Mosque' debate is a red herring

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By 2012, our national debt will be larger than the entire U.S. economy, according to the International Monetary Fund. So what's on the front burner in Washington these days? Zoning issues in lower Manhattan!

Is it OK to put a Muslim community center close to Ground Zero? I don't know, but local authorities don't seem to mind.

That should settle it, but what Sarah Palin calls the "9/11 mosque" has somehow become a headlinegrabbing controversy.

On Friday, President Obama insisted that Muslims have the "same right to practice their religion as anyone else" and can build a mosque near the former World Trade Center site. House minority leader John Boehner, R-Ohio, found the president's comments "deeply troubling." Newt Gingrich accused him of "pandering to radical Islam." (Are there a lot of votes there?)

All this posturing is getting tiresome. The "mosque" controversy isn't about property rights or religious freedom. It's a bogus issue seized by the GOP establishment to distract the rank-and-file from the party's reluctance to shrink government.

From all the caterwauling, you'd think the Park51 group planned to fashion a mock Kaaba out of trade center ashes and mount it atop the wreckage. But you can't see Ground Zero from the Park51 site -- it's separated by two canyonlike city blocks, occupying the former site of a Burlington Coat Factory. "Hallowed ground," indeed.

The plans include building a large mosque -- and a 500-seat theater, swimming pool and food court -- which makes calling it a "mosque" just slightly more accurate than calling a YMCA a "church." Republicans pose as the party of decentralization, yet here they are reversing Tip O'Neill's dictum, insisting that "all politics is national."

There's plenty of hypocrisy to go around, though. It's insulting to hear New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg, who has persecuted bar owners for the crime of displaying ashtrays, wax rhapsodic about private property.

Apparently, if you want to pray to Mecca, your rights are sacrosanct, but if you'd like a cigarette at the bar after a hard day's work, then head on out to the stoop, peasant.

And while Obama pats himself on the back for defending religious freedom and private property, it's not clear who he's arguing with. The mainstream Right has renounced

"using the machinery of government to stop this project," as National Review's editors put it.

You don't need to buy amateur theologian George W. Bush's line that Islam is "a religion of peace" to recognize that the Park51 controversy is a red herring. With Muslims making up 0.8 percent of the U.S. population, dhimmitude seems a more remote threat than national bankruptcy.

In a recent (pre-campaign?) appearance in Des Moines, Iowa, Newt Gingrich denounced Obama's "secular socialist machine," but, when asked, he declined to specify federal programs he would cut.

You see, cutting government is hard, and often unpopular. No surprise, then, that Boehner would rather play urban planner than embrace Wisconsin Republican Rep. Paul Ryan's "road map" for shrinking middle-class entitlements.

Faced with difficult choices, the alleged party of small government always retreats to the lazy politics of Kulturkampf. Hey, that guy's a "card-carrying member" of the ACLU! Ask me about my flag-burning amendment! John Cornyn, R-Texas, head of GOP efforts to take back the Senate this fall, plans to make the Park51 "mosque" a major campaign issue.

It's all too typical: Feed the rubes conservative identity politics, and, with luck, they'll be too distracted to notice you've grafted a Republican "K Street Project" atop the same old edifice of Big Government.

The establishment Right wants to play the Tea Party movement for suckers. It remains to be seen whether they'll play along.

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