

THE BULLY PULPIT WITH TRAINING WHEELS

Folks are still arguing about whether Obama's statement about the Cordoba House was sufficiently impassioned or whether his subsequent statements backtracked off the original statement.

Now, that's not to say that religion is without controversy. Recently, attention has been focused on the construction of mosques in certain communities -- particularly New York. Now, we must all recognize and respect the sensitivities surrounding the development of Lower Manhattan. The 9/11 attacks were a deeply traumatic event for our country. And the pain and the experience of suffering by those who lost loved ones is just unimaginable. So I understand the emotions that this issue engenders. And Ground Zero is, indeed, hallowed ground.

But let me be clear. As a citizen, and as President, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country. (Applause.) And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in Lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances. This is America. And our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakeable. The principle that people of all faiths are welcome in this country and that they will not be treated differently by their government is essential to who we are. The writ of the Founders must endure.

We must never forget those who we lost so tragically on 9/11, and we must always honor those who led the response

to that attack -- from the firefighters who charged up smoke-filled staircases, to our troops who are serving in Afghanistan today. And let us also remember who we're fighting against, and what we're fighting for. Our enemies respect no religious freedom. Al Qaeda's cause is not Islam -- it's a gross distortion of Islam. These are not religious leaders -- they're terrorists who murder innocent men and women and children. In fact, al Qaeda has killed more Muslims than people of any other religion -- and that list of victims includes innocent Muslims who were killed on 9/11.

So that's who we're fighting against. And the reason that we will win this fight is not simply the strength of our arms -- it is the strength of our values. The democracy that we uphold. The freedoms that we cherish. The laws that we apply without regard to race, or religion, or wealth, or status. Our capacity to show not merely tolerance, but respect towards those who are different from us -- and that way of life, that quintessentially American creed, stands in stark contrast to the nihilism of those who attacked us on that September morning, and who continue to plot against us today.

And to be sure, Obama typically conceded the legitimacy of the hurt feelings of all those people in Kansas or Texas outraged that an Islamic cultural center will be built in the general vicinity of lower Manhattan--a city those people will rarely even visit.

But his statement, weak as it was, still allowed the question of constitutionality, of the First Amendment, to begin to contest the din of the fearmongerers trying to use this for political gain.

In response, the fearmongerers have predictably turned on Obama.

But by ascending to the bully pulpit on this issue, it seems Obama has elevated the principles involved (however weakly stated) and made the press enabling the fearmongerers to think twice about the issues involved. Heck, even Mark Halperin is calling on the fearmongerers to stop.

Say what you will about the wisdom of Obama's policies overall, but his belated commentary on religious freedoms clearly was not done for political gain. Quite the contrary. the President knew that he and his party would almost certainly pay a political price for taking a stand, especially this close to the election, and with few prominent leaders, other than New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, on the White House's side. The reaction since the President spoke has been vitriolic and unvarying from leading voices on the right, painting Obama as weak, naive, out of touch and obtuse (not to mention flip-flopping, after his confusing follow-up comments Saturday suggested to some that he might be hedging his position).

Yes, Republicans, you can take advantage of this heated circumstance, backed by the families of the 9/11 victims, in their most emotional return to the public stage since 2001.

But please don't do it. There are a handful of good reasons to oppose allowing the Islamic center to be built so close to Ground Zero, particularly the family opposition and the availability of other, less raw locations. But what is happening now – the misinformation about the center and its supporters; the open declarations of war on Islam on talk radio, the Internet and other forums; the painful divisions

propelled by all the overheated rhetoric – is not worth whatever political gain your party might achieve.

It isn't clear how the battle over the proposed center should or will end. But two things are profoundly clear:

Republicans have a strong chance to win the midterm elections without picking a fight over President Obama's measured words. And a national political fight conducted on the terms we have seen in the past few days will lead to a chain reaction at home and abroad that will have one winner – the very extreme and violent jihadists we all can claim as our true enemy.

Maybe Obama will even respond in turn, and point out just what Halperin does: that fighting the Cordoba House only helps al Qaeda. Then we'd really have a useful discussion about how the most aggressive stance often embraced by the fearmongerers is actually counter-productive.

In any case, it was a cautious, rare attempt to use the bully pulpit. But it was a welcome one. And if we can win this argument, Obama might just learn to like this bully pulpit thing.