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## **Fear and Loathing in America after 9/11: Terrorism, Racism, and the Need for New Beginnings**

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Every year after the terrorist attacks of 2001, New York City has commemorated its grievous losses from that terrible day with a kind of quiet dignity. Since September 2003, the city has lit the “Tribute in Light,” two powerful spotlight beams that soar into the night air where the World Trade Center once was<sup>1)</sup> (the “Tribute in Light” was first launched on March 11, 2002, for an initial period of one month).<sup>2)</sup> On the actual anniversary, New York has hosted a prayer service and public reading of the names of the dead. The simplicity of these gestures has endowed the day with feelings of mourning and loss, and these have been the dominant emotions in New York on

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1) David W. Dunlap, “‘Tribute in Light’ Will Keep Shining, This Year and The Next,” Cityroom, *The New York Times*, September 10, 2001, <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/10/tribute-in-light-will-keep-shining-this-year-and-the-next/>.

2) Terence Smith, “Tribute in Light,” Online News Hour, PBS.org, March 11, 2002, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/terrorism/jan-june02/light\\_3-11.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/terrorism/jan-june02/light_3-11.html).

the anniversaries of the September 11 attacks, at least until 2010.

On September 11, 2010, rage took to the streets in ways that stunned many observers. *The New York Times* described “heated demonstrations” that illustrated “political and religious tensions and an unmistakable sense that a once-unifying day was now replete with division,” further characterizing the darkening atmosphere of the day as “hard to envision just a year ago.”<sup>3)</sup> The most publicly acknowledged cause for the change in the mood was the announcement that a “mosque” would be built at Ground Zero, which seemed to light a fire under some Americans (the Arab American comedian Dean Obeidallah writes that “Some people truly appear to hate Muslims more than they love the ideals of our country”).<sup>4)</sup> When first reported in December 2009,<sup>5)</sup> the planned construction of the “Ground Zero Mosque,” as it has come to be called (although it is not at Ground Zero and will not in fact be a mosque)<sup>6)</sup> caused little controversy, but staring in the early summer news of the project

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3) Anne Barnard and Manny Hernandez, “On Sept. 11 Anniversary, Rifts amid Mourning,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/12/nyregion/12sept11.html>.

4) Dean Obeidallah, “Why Building the Mosque is Good for America,” *The Huffington Post*, August 16, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dean-obeidallah/why-building-the-mosque-i\\_b\\_683060.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dean-obeidallah/why-building-the-mosque-i_b_683060.html).

5) Ralph Blumenthal and Sharaf Mowjood, “Muslim Prayers and Renewal near Ground Zero,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/09/nyregion/09mosque.html>.

6) Park51, commonly known as the “Ground Zero Mosque,” models itself after the 92StreetY, a prominent Jewish cultural center in Manhattan. Park51’s design includes a prayer space, but it also includes recreation facilities, a restaurant, and an auditorium to host cultural events and lectures, making it a cultural center rather than a mosque. The site is located two blocks north of where the World Trade Center stood.

snowballed into a major scandal that became a cultural debate about the nature of American society and the rights of American Muslims therein. Quickly, a kind of rank populism directed against Muslims seemed to be spilling out everywhere.

I went to observe two of the demonstrations in New York on September 11 2010, although more may have been held. At City Hall Park, people had assembled to voice their support for the construction of the Muslim Cultural Center, first called Cordoba House but now renamed Park51. Two long city blocks and a world away (and much closer to “Ground Zero”) was the anti-Park51 demonstration. In between them was a smaller but not insignificant demonstration of 9/11 “truthers,” those who believe that the official narrative of the terrorist attacks is doubtful and imply that the U.S. government itself was behind the attacks. What I saw at the first demonstration was familiar. What I witnessed at the second, however, was frightening.

What I will dub the “pro-tolerance” demonstration was peopled by a cross-section of New York City. It was noisy, it was disorganized, and it felt hastily brought together. A quickly constructed stage was at one end of the demonstration and speakers from a wide variety of political causes took their turns proclaiming upon it such things as a belief in multicultural America, opposition to bigotry and racism, criticism of American imperialism, and support for workers’ struggles in the city and around the world. The mood here was one of solidarity in spite of the protestors’ differences. Multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-racial, young and old, the assembled group was made up of many different kinds of people, dressed in a variety of attire. It seemed, in short, to be a pretty fair representation of New

York City.

The “anti-tolerance” demonstration was something else entirely, a representation of some other side of New York and the United States. Organized by a radical rightwing group called “Stop the Islamization of America,” this assembly was completely high-tech, with a large stage and a massive television monitor above that beamed in satellite feeds of John Bolton and other staunch conservatives to offer their “anti-Ground Zero Mosque” message. Men with suits and walkie-talkies were shuffling people and speakers around. Large swaths of the crowd were wearing the same anti-mosque t-shirts. The money behind the event was plainly evident, as was the constituency it attracted. Unlike the pro-tolerance demonstration, this group was overwhelmingly white and mostly older. American flags were everywhere, as were signs expressing the anti-Islam sentiment of the demonstration. Some were directed against the religion: “Hey Islam, we will never submit,” “What would Jesus Do? Have his throat slit by Mohammed,” and “Sharia” written in bloodlike letters. Others were directed against immigration policy: “Why give terrorists the rights of US citizens they are sworn to kill,” “Terrorist Sleeping [sic] Cells in America are Muslims! Wake Up America!!!!” and “Illegal Aliens were Responsible for the 9/11 Attacks. The Solution is Simple. Close the Borders. No Immigration = No Terrorism” (As a point of fact, none of the 9/11 hijackers entered the country illegally).<sup>7)</sup> And then there were the simple three-word signs: “No

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7) “Identity and Immigration Status of 9/11 terrorists,” The Federation for American Immigration Reform website, February 2004, [http://www.fairus.org/site/PageServer?pagename=iic\\_immigrationissuecenter582](http://www.fairus.org/site/PageServer?pagename=iic_immigrationissuecenter582).

Victory Mosque,” “No Obama Mosque,” and “No Bloomberg Mosque.” At the height of the demonstration, thousands of people yelled “No Mosque! No Mosque!”

I also observed one man participating in an increasingly heated conversation with passers-by. The exchange was sparked by the fact that he was wearing a placard that on one side depicted a toilet (labeled “toilet bowl”) and on the other was a Qur’an (labeled “toilet paper”) hanging off the placard by a hook. He had been walking the street yelling, “Get your toilet paper here! That’s what it’s good for. I’ve been using the shit book since Sept. 12, 2001!” Asked by a journalist to identify himself, he refused. A passer-by started berating him by asking if he knew how racist he was being. “You want to call me a racist? Yes, I’m a racist,” he declared. “I hate Muslims. I do, and you should too. I hate them as much as they hate me.”

I have lived in New York City for twenty years, and I have never seen this kind of blatant and braying prejudice before. It was raw and completely in your face. Directed not only at Muslims, their animus was also aimed at the few political leaders, such as Mayor Bloomberg, who publicly supported Park51. The entire episode left me depressed.

What has enabled such a radical change in mood over such a short time? For one thing, most of the country’s professional politicians, both Democrats and Republicans, had been either extremely timid in their defense of religious freedom or downright hostile to the idea that Muslims have the same rights as others to property and the free exercise of religion. Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich likened Muslims to Nazis (“Nazis don’t have the right to

put up a sign next to the holocaust museum in Washington,”),<sup>8)</sup> and Sarah Palin accused Muslims of being “insensitive,” in a way that makes it hard to see how she doesn’t equate all Muslims with terrorists.<sup>9)</sup>

As Gingrich and Palin’s statements suggest, timidity is not the only cause of this unleashed animus. Today, rightwing defenders of the United States—from demagogic politicians to street demonstrators—see themselves as charged to keep the country from becoming an Islamic state. What used to be a minority opinion endorsed only by the radical fringe of the right—namely that a “stealth jihad” is being waged by ordinary Muslims in the country to overturn the constitution and enshrine Sharia law throughout the land<sup>10)</sup>—has now entered the mainstream. As further evidence of this, consider how, in November 2010, Oklahomans voted overwhelmingly in favor of a state constitutional amendment, State Question 755, which would ban the use of Sharia law (i.e. Islamic jurisprudence) in their courts.<sup>11)</sup> Voters in that state, after being inundated by a well-funded campaign, were reacting to what one Republican State Representative, Rex Duncan, has called “a war for the survival of the United States.”<sup>12)</sup> On November 29, a

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8) Qtd. in Matt DeLong, “Newt Gingrich Compares ‘Ground-Zero Mosque’ to Backers of Nazis,” *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2010, <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2010/08/newt-gingrich-compares-ground.html>.

9) Karen Tumulty, “Some Republican Figures Urge Candidates not to Focus on NYC mosque issue,” *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/17/AR2010081705860.html>. Neither Palin nor Gingrich was in or officially running for office when commenting on Park51.

10) Robert Spencer, *Stealth Jihad: How Radical Islam is Subverting America Without Guns or Bombs* (Regenery: Washington D.C.: 2008).

11) The amendment can be viewed at the Oklahoma State Government’s website: <https://www.sos.ok.gov/documents/questions/755.pdf>.

federal judge temporarily blocked the amendment as unconstitutional. Thirteen other states have followed with their own versions of anti-Sharia legislation.<sup>13)</sup>

Nor is this anti-Muslim and anti-mosque sentiment limited to Oklahoma and the charged area around Ground Zero. According to a news survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life in September 2010, at least 35 mosques around the country have faced opposition over the past two years.<sup>14)</sup> In one case in California, mosque opponents were advised to bring dogs to their demonstration, because the leader of their group claimed that Muslims "hate dogs."<sup>15)</sup> Meanwhile, Terry Jones, a ridiculous leader of a fringe religious group in Florida garnered international coverage of his plan to burn Qur'ans on September 11, 2010; he was ultimately talked out of his plan by Robert Gates, the Secretary of Defense, no less.<sup>16)</sup> In October 2010, conservative talk-show host Bill

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12) James McKinley, Jr. "Judge Blocks Oklahoma's Ban on Using Shariah Law in Court," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/30/us/30oklahoma.html>.

13) Zaid Jilani, "At least thirteen states have introduced bills guarding against non-existent threat of Sharia law," *ThinkProgress*, February 8, 2011, <http://thinkprogress.org/2011/02/08/Sharia-states>.

14) Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Controversies Over Mosques and Islamic Centers Across the U.S.*, September 24, 2010, <http://features.pewforum.org/muslim/assets/mosque-map-all-text-10-5.pdf>.

15) Phil Whillon, "Islamic Group Denounces planned Temecula mosque protest." *The Los Angeles Times*. July 28, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jul/28/local/la-me-mosque-protest-20100728>.

16) Damien Cave and Anne Barnard, "Minister Wavers on Plans to Burn Koran," *The New York Times*, September 9, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/10/us/10obama.html>. In March 20, 2011, Jones did stage a "mock trial" of the Qur'an which culminated in his public burning of the holy book and which subsequently ignited deadly protests in Afghanistan (Encayat Najafizada and Rod

O'Reilly appeared on the popular daytime television show *The View*, where he stated that "Muslims killed us on 9/11," causing two of the hosts, Whoopi Goldberg and Joy Behar, to walk off set in anger.<sup>17)</sup> The Texas State Board of Education voted to limit references to Islam in their high-school textbooks, even though, as the Associated Press noted, "the resolution cites world-history books no longer used in Texas schools."<sup>18)</sup> According to the Texas Freedom Network, which advocates for religious freedom, the resolution was "based on superficial and grossly misleading claims," including allegations that the textbooks "whitewash" Islam while vilifying Christianity, and that Arab investors are taking over the American publishing industry.<sup>19)</sup>

What is going on here? In short, the fear of terrorism has been usurped by a very popular fear of Muslims. The question is not just why this has happened, by why it has taken nine years for this dramatic change to occur in the United States. The answer to these questions, I believe, is intimately connected to the election of Barack

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Nordland, "Afghans Avenge Florida Koran Burning, Killing 12," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/02/world/asia/02afghanistan.html>.)

17) Devon Thomas, "Bill O'Reilly On 'The View': 'Muslims Killed Us on 9/11'; Co-Hosts Walk Off," CBSNews.com, October 14, 2010, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-31749\\_162-20019660-10391698.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-31749_162-20019660-10391698.html).

18) April Castro, "Texas Ed Board Adopts Resolution Limiting Islam in Textbooks," *USA Today*, September 25, 2010, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-09-26-textbooks25\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-09-26-textbooks25_ST_N.htm).

19) "Attacking Religious Freedom: the Anti-Islam Resolution," The Texas Freedom Network website, [http://www.tfn.org/site/PageServer?pagename=issues\\_sboe\\_islam\\_resolution](http://www.tfn.org/site/PageServer?pagename=issues_sboe_islam_resolution). The accusation was based on a 2008 decision by Dubai's royal family to invest heavily in a company that owns Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; but the family had already lost its stake in the company. See James McKinley, Jr., "A Claim of Pro-Islam Bias in Textbooks," *The New York Times*. September 22, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/23/education/23texas.html>.



Obama as President of the United States.

Since 2001, many scholars, myself included, have written about the rebirth of Orientalist clichés and the rise of the Clash of Civilizations thesis in American popular and political discourses.<sup>20)</sup> There is of course good reason for this. It is certainly true that new forms of racism and hostility against Arabs and Muslims have exploded since the terrorist attacks. Polling data bears this out. According to an annual Washington Post-ABC News poll, approximately 39% of Americans held unfavorable opinions of Islam in 2001. Dipping for a few years, the number rose to 46% in 2006. In 2010, it reached 49%.<sup>21)</sup> According to a poll by *The Economist* magazine in the summer of 2010, the number hovers at around 55 percent.<sup>22)</sup> Such enmity is expressed in a variety of ways, from the often invisible workings of employment and housing discrimination to the more visible instances of hate crime attacks, mass arrests, and curtailments of civil liberties for Muslim Americans. The Tea Party Nation, a political organization, even demanded during the 2010 election that the African American Muslim Congressman Keith Ellison be ousted from his seat because he is a Muslim.<sup>23)</sup>

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20) See, for instance, Moustafa Bayoumi, "A Bloody Stupid War," *Middle East Report and Information Project* 231 (Summer 2004): 36-45.

21) "Washington Post-ABC News Poll," *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2010 version, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postpoll\\_09072010.html?sid=ST2010090806236](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postpoll_09072010.html?sid=ST2010090806236).

22) "Mosque Building and Its Discontents," *The Economist*, August, 19, 2010, 2011, [http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2010/08/islamic\\_cultural\\_centre\\_sorta\\_near\\_ground\\_zero](http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2010/08/islamic_cultural_centre_sorta_near_ground_zero). The 55% figure adds the 27.7% of "Somewhat unfavorable" with the 27.7% of "very unfavorable."

23) Justin Elliot, "Tea Party Leader: Defeat Ellison because he's Muslim," *Salon.com*. October 26, 2010, [http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war\\_room/2010/](http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war_room/2010/)

But the scholarly reliance on Orientalism—a long tradition in Western thought, identified by Edward Said, of conceptualizing and stereotyping the Orient at the inferior Other to the superior West, and thus of “dominating, restructuring, and having authority” over the Orient<sup>24</sup>)—for an explanation of this development misses other traditions in American thought that are equally if not more relevant to the situation in the United States today.

The first tradition to consider is the long and sordid history of nativism in American thought and practice. The inflamed politics of today may blind us to the ways that other groups in the United States have encountered very similar opposition to their presence in the country and have had their American credentials questioned at every turn. A look at John Higham’s classic work from 1955, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925*, makes this point clear. Higham describes the ways that Catholics, Germans, Communists, blacks, Jews, Asians, and immigrants of all sorts have all been vilified by a doctrine known by such names as Know-Nothingism, 100 Per Cent Americanism, and the Anglo-Saxon ideal. “Nativism,” Higham writes in the preface to the second edition of his book, “was a defensive type of nationalism, but the defense varied as the nativist lashed out sometimes against a religious peril, sometimes against a revolutionary peril, sometimes against a racial peril.”<sup>25</sup>)

Muslim Americans today are cast as the latest villains in the grand nativist epic about the downfall of the United States, and they are

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24) Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 3.

25) John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns in American Nativism 1860-1925*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Antheum, 1977), ii.

seen as the bearers of a combined religious, revolutionary, and racial threat. As the signs at the anti-Park51 demonstration indicate, it is not uncommon to find this anti-Muslim discourse connected directly with a broader anti-immigrant sentiment in the country, most clearly expressed by Arizona's law SB1070, the toughest piece of anti-immigrant legislation in the country today, which hands to the police the broad power to detain anyone they believe is in the country illegally.<sup>26)</sup> "Why They Won't Assimilate" is the title of a 2007 article by Selwyn Duke, a failed tennis pro turned rightwing blogger, for the online daily *American Thinker*. Duke argues that Muslims and Mexicans, whom he derisively refers to as M&Ms, are abusing en masse the proud tradition of American immigration. "Today's M&M influx (Moslems and Mexicans) is distinguished from previous immigrant waves by a sense of entitlement," he writes. "Where Mexicans exhibit ethnic patriotism, Moslems manifest religious chauvinism. Far too many pious Moslems believe they have been enjoined to impose their faith on others by any means necessary; this is why they will unabashedly demand concessions, such as their own dormitories at colleges and an Arabic public school in New York City. It's also why they have fought for the right to use *sharia* law to settle civil disputes in Canada."<sup>27)</sup>

Muslims and Mexicans are in the spotlight today, and they are seen as being as unassimilable now just as Irish Catholics were in the nineteenth century. New York Reverend Kevin Madigan, Pastor

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26) The bill for the law can be viewed at the Arizona State Government's website: <http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/bills/sb1070s.pdf>.

27) Selwyn Duke, "Why They Won't Assimilate," *American Thinker*, May 21, 2007, [http://www.americanthinker.com/2007/05/why\\_they\\_wont\\_assimilate.html](http://www.americanthinker.com/2007/05/why_they_wont_assimilate.html).

of St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church in Lower Manhattan, made the connection clear. Researching his church's past (which is also about two blocks from Ground Zero), the reverend wrote a letter to his parishioners and delivered several sermons and lectures regarding the similarity of opposition this his church once faced and that Muslim American are confronting today. *The New York Times* reported on his letter as follows:

On Christmas Eve 1806, two decades after the church was built, the building was surrounded by Protestants incensed at a celebration going on inside—a religious observance then viewed by some in the United States as an exercise in 'popish superstition,' more commonly referred to as Christmas. Protesters tried to disrupt the service. In the melee that ensued, dozens were injured, and a policeman was killed. 'We were treated as second-class citizens; we were viewed with suspicion,' Father Madigan wrote in his letter to parishioners, adding, 'Many of the charges being leveled at Muslim-Americans today are the same as those once leveled at our forebears.'<sup>28)</sup>

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28) Paul Vitello, "In Fierce Opposition to a Muslim Center, Echoes of an Old Fight," *New York Times*, October 17, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/08/nyregion/08zero.html>. What is surprising about the emerging anti-assimilationist narrative for American Muslims is that the mainstream right has resisted it for a long time, and many still do. For these conservatives, American opportunity is what separates the United States from Europe (see Radley Balko, "The American Muslim Success Story," Reason.com, blog, August 17, 2010, <http://reason.com/blog/2010/08/17/the-american-muslim-success-st>). How America treats its Muslims thus becomes part of American identity, away from the coddling and cultural suicide of Western Europe and its effete welfare policies. More disturbingly is the emergent if not now dominant trend among American conservatives to connect their paranoia about Muslims to European rightwing movements and leaders. Evidence of this can be seen in that the Dutch anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant politician Geert Wilders was the guest speaker at this year's September 11th "anti-mosque" demonstration, and books such as Bruce Bawer's *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam is Destroying the West from Within* are popular in the United States. What should thus give us considerable cause

Nativism, in other words, offers a clue into the present climate in the United States, but to understand the situation more fully we need to turn to a related phenomenon, what Richard Hofstadter, in a classic essay of American political theory, calls “the paranoid style in American Politics.”<sup>29)</sup>

In his 1964 essay, Hofstadter argues that a recurring motif in American conservative discourse is a “paranoid style” of politics. He uses the term “paranoid” because he believes it best describes “the heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasies”<sup>30)</sup> of rightwing conservatives. As Higham does, Hofstadter reaches back into the nineteenth century to provide a genealogy of his subject, but he is most interested in the Cold War politics of his age. The “paranoid style” was evident everywhere he turned. What drove Joseph McCarthy and those like him, Hofstadter argues, was the belief that they was surrounded by “a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man.”<sup>31)</sup> The paranoid disposition is driven by “catastrophe or the fear of catastrophe,” which “is most likely to elicit the syndrome of paranoid rhetoric.”<sup>32)</sup>

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for concern is that the paranoid style of American politics has meant that conservatives in the United States are seeking out and making connections with Europe’s extreme rightwing groups and political parties, such as Wilders’ Freedom Party, on the basis of their shared anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant beliefs. See “The Flying Dutchman,” *Newsweek*, February 16, 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/2009/02/16/the-flying-dutchman.html>.

29) Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 3.

30) *Ibid.*

31) *Ibid.*, 27.

32) *Ibid.*, 39.

The paranoid style of American politics propels the fear and loathing of American Muslims today. The irrational fear that Sharia law is on the cusp of conquering the nation has its roots in the Cold War conservative belief that the minions of the Soviet Union were deeply entrenched in the American ruling class and ready to turn on a Ruble. Immigration in the past and politically correct multiculturalism today have left the nation nearly defenseless to the true and existential threats of the hour.

The modern anti-Muslim crusader in the United States believes that Islam is on the march in the country, and that he and like-minded Americans are the last resistance. They believe that the conspiracy itself reaches high into the upper echelons of the ruling class. How better to explain the fact that twenty-four percent of the electorate, according to a *Time* poll from August 2010, believe that the president is himself a Muslim?<sup>33</sup>) There is certainly a kind of implied racial coding going on here—being Muslim also means that Obama is simply not one of “us”—but the feeling that a cabal of internationals and Muslims have or are ready to take over the country is implicit in rightwing rhetoric today, from Republican leader Sarah Palin’s exhortation to “take our country back”<sup>34</sup>) (from what, one might ask?) to the frequently heard demands to see Barack Obama’s birth certificate to the labeling of Park51 as the “Obama

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33) Alex Altman, “TIME Poll: Majority Oppose Mosque, Many Distrust Muslims,” *Time*, August 19, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2011799,00.html>.

34) Dean Reynolds, “Palin: ‘It’s Time to Take Our Country Back,’” CBSNews.com, September 17, 2010, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544\\_162-20016903-503544.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20016903-503544.html).

Mosque.” The routine and copious debunkings and the offerings of proof of Obama’s credentials are superfluous in this fantasy. It’s all a kind of political paranoia of Muslims. As Hofstadter writes, “what distinguishes the paranoid style…is not the absence of verifiable facts … but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events.”<sup>35)</sup> Almost the same attack is leveled against Mayor Bloomberg for his support of Park51. The fantasy here is that his endorsement of the project is a trade-off for a major business deal in the Middle East for Bloomberg News.<sup>36)</sup> Understanding the paranoid style, in other words, is as relevant today to understanding rightwing conservatives and how they see the world as if it was 1964. Consider this paragraph from Hofstadter’s essay:

The modern right wing…feels dispossessed: America has been taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final act of subversion. The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism has been gradually undermined by socialist and communist schemers; the old national security and independence have been destroyed by treasonous plots, having as their most powerful agents not merely outsiders and foreigners but major statesmen seated at the very centers of American power. Their predecessors discovered foreign conspiracies; the modern radical right finds that conspiracy also embraces betrayal at home.<sup>37)</sup>

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35) Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style,” 37.

36) Noel Sheppard, “Is Bloomberg Supporting Ground Zero Mosque for Business Reasons?” *Newsbusters*, August 27, 2011, <http://newsbusters.org/blogs/noel-sheppard/2010/08/27/bloomberg-supporting-ground-zero-mosque-business-reasons>.

37) Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style,” 24-25.

It became commonplace this past summer to argue that former President George W. Bush, despite his launching of two wars on Muslim-majority countries and frequent mentions of “Islamofascism” and the “axis of evil”, had been more “respectful” towards Islam (consider Peter Beinart’s article “America Has Disgraced Itself”<sup>38</sup>) as an example), as if words can be as easily dislodged from actions, But this misses the point. Conservatives were driving the anti-Muslim agenda this summer, but under Bush’s leadership their notion of an imminent takeover of the United States’ government held little credence and made little sense (that particular conspiracy theory was left to Michael Moore’s documentary *Fahrenheit 911*, which illustrated a kind of paranoia of the left.) On those few occasions when Bush did speak out for Muslim Americans and against hate crimes, the underlying point was not really tolerance but, as Max Weber would see it, the state’s monopoly on violence.<sup>39</sup>) The fact is that until recently, the American Muslim community was most concerned about state repression and racial profiling. Now, they have state repression, racial profiling *and* a stoked populist fear and anger to worry about.

How do we get out of this situation, where the political rhetoric of the country threatens not only today’s immigrant communities (Muslims, Mexicans and others) but also the very fabric of the country and its

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38) Peter Beinart, “America Has Disgraced Itself,” *The Daily Beast*, August 17, 2010, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-08-17/ground-zero-mosque-controversy-america-has-disgraced-itself>.

39) Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 2004), 32-94.



own ideals? One way that Arab and Muslim Americans, and many others, have been attempting a solution is through the redemptive power of the arts. We have witnessed over the last few years a remarkable increase in counter-hegemonic works of the imagination in the United States, which increasingly attempt to represent the reality of American Muslims. Works of fiction such as Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*,<sup>40)</sup> non-fiction books such as Alia Malek's *A Country Called Amreeka*,<sup>41)</sup> films such as Cherien Dabis's *Amreeka*, and popular music by artists like The Narcicyst point to a growing body of work that seeks complexity and coexistence through mutual respect. Likewise, the political satire of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert frequently take on today's anti-Muslim prejudice with pointed critique, and major organs of the cultural establishment, from the Kennedy Center to the New York Public Library to the Metropolitan Museum of Art have all held major exhibitions or symposia on Islam, Arab culture, or a broadly defined "Muslim culture" (which, by defining culture as "Muslim," is unfortunately often tinged with its own kind of liberal Orientalism). This past summer, the Asia Society in New York also held a Sufi Music Festival in Union Square, attracting 5,000 people to its events. Zeba Rahman, one of the organizers, recently told me that she sees her work as a cultural producer as crucial in reducing the tensions of the moment and building bridges of sympathy in a climate of extreme polarization.

The arts will always have a role to play in any society, helping that society determine its values, forge connections for its own future,

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40) Randa Jarrar, *A Map of Home* (New York: Other Press, 2008).

41) Alia Malek, *A Country Called Amreeka* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

and delegitimize its paranoid fantasies. But it is likely too easy to overstate the value of the arts, for the conflicts of today are ultimately political and not aesthetic questions. The totality of the well-meaning work of dialogue and accommodation can easily end in a poof of smoke. All it takes is one unmanned drone dropping a bomb on civilians in Afghanistan or another terroristic attack on the streets of the United States to inflame passions beyond comprehension. Only a politics dedicated to reducing conflict and enlarging justice and equality can solve the problems of political violence and ameliorate or at least diminish the allure of racism. As seductive as it is, relying on the arts to solve the problems of the day is rather like reading Shakespeare in a lawn chair during the Siege of Leningrad. “The classics can console,” Derek Walcott writes in his poem “Sea Grapes,” “but not enough.”<sup>42)</sup>

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42) Derek Walcott, “Sea Grapes,” *Collected Poems: 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 297.

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**Abstract**

**Fear and Loathing in America after 9/11:  
Terrorism, Racism, and the Need for New  
Beginnings**

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No single event has dominated an American decade the way the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 have for the 2000s, at least not for a very long time. Completely surprising most Americans, the attacks seemed to signal a rupture from the easy living and prosperity of the past decade and an entry into darker and more difficult times. The attacks became occasions for grief and mourning, self-reflection and self-absorption, paranoia, jingoism, dissent, and new kinds of racisms along with elaborate clampdowns on civil liberties. By 2010, fear of Muslim Americans had escalated to the point where a proposed Islamic cultural center to be built in lower Manhattan became a divisive public issue across the nation. This essay charts some of the contemporary opposition to Muslim Americans and Muslim immigration to the United States and suggests that American traditions of nativism and paranoia have played a role in the conservative rhetoric often heard in the United States today. The essay concludes by examining the possibilities and limitations of cultural production to forge greater understanding in times of political conflict.

**Key Words**

Muslim Americans, Paranoia, Racism, Cultural Production, Terrorism, Civil Rights