

## **American Malaise Revisited**

*\*By Maria L. Fornella*

*“I want to talk to you right now about a fundamental threat to American democracy. I do not mean our political and civil liberties. They will endure. The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in... the loss of a unity of purpose for our Nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America”*

President Jimmy Carter, 1979

What was supposed to be a summer of recovery and rebuilding, has instead become a summer of gloom, division and bigotry.

The prospects of a double-dip recession still loom high for Americans in the light of a revised GDP report that puts annual growth rate for the second quarter at an anemic 1.6%, not 2.4% as predicted earlier.

As with all economic downturns, fear and anxiety about an uncertain future translate into intolerance directed toward “the others”. Two weeks ago it was the Arizona anti-immigration law and the anti-gay ban, this past week it was the so called “Ground Zero Mosque” controversy. The underlying angst is thus surfacing in the form of aggressive anti-immigrant, homophobic and Islamophobic sentiments.

Most Americans (61%) are against this “Córdoba House” project, which is not exactly a plan for a mosque but for a Muslim Community Center, modeled after the Jewish Community Centers and the YMCA. Its grounds are located two blocks away from Ground Zero. Interestingly, the project was made public by the New York Times as a local lower Manhattan issue in 2009, and went unnoticed. It only exploded into the headlines recently, when public figures such as Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck and Newt Gingrich leapt at the opportunity of using it to further stoke the flames of division and xenophobia. While the Lower Manhattan community advisory board, several Jewish leaders and Mayor Bloomberg support the project, the Jewish Anti-Defamation League opposes it, arguing that its proximity to Ground Zero would cause unnecessary pain for the families of victims of 9-11. This argument has merit and should therefore be the focus of the debate, but it isn't. Instead, Gingrich compared the project to putting a Nazi sign next to the Holocaust Museum, and Palin called it a “stab in the heart of the families of 9-11”.

Daisy Kahn, the wife of the Imam in charge of the project, appeared recently on a Sunday talk show together with Manhattan's JCC director Rabbi Joy Levitt to defend the project. Kahn explained that historically in the United States, as

members of different religions and creeds assimilate to the general culture, their practice, attitudes and activities become Americanized: that is the context within which the Córdoba Project should be understood: as a place where Muslims could meet, exercise, bring their children to Day Care and yes, pray. Indeed, contrary to the public image prevalent today, Muslims in the US are, according to Christiane Amanpour, "the most assimilated of all Muslims in the Western World." The United States also has a strong Interfaith Dialogue movement which supports the project.

President Obama weighed into the controversy within the first 24 hours, saying Muslims were protected by the First Amendment's Freedom of Religion and had a right to build the center. After being chastised by the usual suspects (the same that insist Obama himself is a Muslim and have doubts about his citizenship), the President later qualified his first statement by adding he had "commented on the *right* but not on the *wisdom*" of the project. Clearly, that is what is at issue here: Muslims, like all other religious groups in America, do have the Constitutional right to congregate and worship as they please, but in the light of the deep wounds of 9-11, the symbolic aspect of the location tends to overshadow other valid considerations. However, as everything in today's political toxic environment, it instantly became more fodder for demagogues and added more virulence to the political discourse. By correctly pointing out the discrepancy, Obama was derided as dithering as and insincere.

Opposition to the Córdoba House is not an isolated incident that can be explained by its proximity to 9-11, which gives the outrage some validation. There are similar projects that have been put on hold due to protests as far as Wisconsin and California, and in the last few days there was a mosque burnt down in Tennessee, and a stabbing of a Muslim cab driver in New York. Anti-Muslim sentiment is conspicuously strong throughout the country, strong enough to be compared to the Swiss controversy over construction of new minarets. Even if the Mosque issue blows over in a month like other arguments have in the past (think Dubai Ports World brouhaha in 2005, for example) each of these bitter controversies plants seeds of discord that are used by demagogical purposes, mainly to delegitimize the government.

People's anxiety about the economy is fertile ground for all kinds of phobias to thrive, whether directed against the Latinos moving into white neighborhoods, gay marriage in their town halls, or mosques being built nearby. Or against the first Black President, whose middle name happens to be Hussein. Angst and pessimism are so widespread that not even what would otherwise be considered good news has the power to cheer Americans up.

The official end of the war in Iraq came and went practically unnoticed by a population unsure whether America "won or lost" there. After 7 years of fighting an asymmetrical war that has cost, at a minimum, 5,000 American lives, 150,000 Iraqi lives and 700 billion dollars, the United States is withdrawing its combat troops, leaving behind 50,000 troops in support roles and hoping that the Iraqi forces will be able to defend the population from the sectarian violence that is certain to ensue. The parliamentary elections in March delivered no clear winners, and neither Shiite Prime Minister Al-Maliki nor his rival Sunni former Prime Minister Alawi have been able to form a

government coalition. In addition, the power and resource distribution struggle between the central government and the regions is still unsettled, and Iran is likely to step into the power vacuum left by the Americans and meddle in its neighbor's politics for years to come. The counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan is not delivering any positive results either, and the American relationship with the Karzai government is at best uneasy. Besides, to paraphrase Frank Rich's recent op-ed titled "How Fox (TV) betrayed Petraeus", how can you win Muslims hearts and minds in Kandahar if you are at war against Islam at home?

No wonder Americans are not celebrating. Instead, they are turning inwards and becoming more isolationists, xenophobic and protectionist. And there is no leadership to pull us through these difficult times. The President is in his bunker, trying to change the topic to Katrina or to Middle East Peace talks (a relatively safe topic, if you think that in probably a hundred years it will still be the main headline of the New York Times). The Republican Party has been hijacked by the Tea Party Movement of Sarah Palin and talk-radio host and Fox news commentator Glenn Beck, who this past weekend held a "Restoring our Honor" march on Washington. From a podium at the Lincoln Memorial, on exactly the 47th the anniversary of Martin Luther King's *I have a dream* speech, Beck told a mostly white crowd of 87,000 that "Today, America is beginning to turn back to God." He spoke about "restoring the honor to America" and "reclaiming" the civil rights movement, which has been so "distorted". When asked whether he had chosen that date for his rally on Washington to coincide with King's anniversary, Beck responded it was not by intention but "by divine providence".

This cynical usurpation of the Black leader's banner by Beck is just one example of how he will go to extremes to maintain his radio and TV ratings. In spite of his theatrical rants and stage hysterics, he is an able manipulator of white anger and racial anxiety.

This sad picture of America beset by anxiety about deficits, unemployment and higher taxes, and divided by bigotry begs the question of who benefits. In an election year, the question may sound naïve, but it isn't. Republicans are increasingly worried about the "wacko wing" of the party that has run amok and will be impossible to rein in. Tea Party candidates are defeating incumbents in Republican primaries all over the country. The time is running out for serious Republicans to stand up, stop the nonsense and impose some restraint on its rank and file, while at the same time distance themselves from the most extreme Tea Party rants. They cannot reasonably devote themselves full-time to maligning the President and Democrats in Congress. They need to present a plan for economic growth, jobs and national reconciliation, to show they care about recovery and about governing. By opening the door to Tea Party candidates to win in November, they are in fact giving the President a chance at re-election.

At the same time, Obama should move aggressively to the center of the political spectrum, moderate the ambition of his reforms and adopt an agenda of a balanced budget and an extended period for tax cuts. In this way he could win over the Independents, who will most certainly be appalled at the McCarthyist-

like atmosphere on Capitol Hill after November, and will vote for him again in 2012, over a Palin, a Huckabee or a Gingrich. This coming year represents a fork in the road for the President: even if the economy recovers in a visible, sustainable way, Obama will have to choose between pragmatism and ideology, between becoming another Bill Clinton or another Jimmy Carter.

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