



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on August 17, 2010

Gov. Christie Warns Republicans Over Ground Zero Mosque flak

The first-term New Jersey governor said Monday that politicians, both locally and nationally, may be overreacting to the planned construction of an Islamic cultural center just two blocks from the remains of the World Trade Center towers that were leveled by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. He warned that many Republicans appear to be painting "all of Islam" with a broad brush, equating Islam with radical, militant anti-American extremists.



Christie's cautionary remarks were sharply at odds with statements made by a number of Republican stalwarts, including Newt Gingrich of Georgia, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and former Alaska governor and 2008 vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, both of whom have said the center, often referred to as a mosque, should not be built so close to the site where nearly three thousand innocent Americans died at the hands of Middle East terrorists, mostly from Saudi Arabia, who flew two hijacked planes into the towers on the same day another plane was deliberately flown into the Pentagon. A fourth hijacked plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. President Obama, on the other hand, has publicly defended the right of property owners to have the site built on a private plot, but has not commented on the wisdom of building it so close to the site where the towers fell and so many innocent people died.

"Given my last position, that I was the first U.S attorney post 9/11 in New Jersey, I understand acutely the pain and sorrow and upset of the family members who lost loved ones that day at the hands of radical Muslim extremists," Christie said. "And their sensitivities and concerns have to be taken into account. Just because it's nearly nine years later, those sensitivities cannot and should not be ignored. . . . On the other hand, we cannot paint all of Islam with that brush . . . We have to bring people together. And what offends me the most about all this, is that it's being used as a political football by both parties.



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And what disturbs me about the president's remarks is that he is now using it as a political football as well. I think the president of the United States should rise above that. And (he) should not be using this as a political football, and I don't believe that it would be responsible of me to get involved and comment on this any further because it just put me in the same political arena as all of them."

Meanwhile, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a liberal Republican, has seen his popularity rating drop to its lowest level in five years, the *New York Post* reports, due in part to what the *Post* calls the mayor's "ardent defense of a proposed mosque several blocks from Ground Zero." A poll conducted by Marist College's Institute for Public Opinion, showed the third-term mayor's [approval rating](#) has dropped to 49 percent, down from 56 percent in April. Anything below 50 percent for an incumbent is a sign of serious trouble. According to the poll, 53 percent of those surveyed are opposed to the mayor's position on the Muslim center. Of the Republicans polled, 74 percent were opposed to the planned center, while half the Democrats were opposed.

Republicans clearly view this as a political issue, perhaps a "wedge issue" to separate voters from the Obama administration and Democrats in general. Obama has been criticized from both sides for what appears to be his backpedaling on the issue. Last Friday evening he issued a ringing affirmation of the right of the Muslims to the same use of private property and enjoyment of religious freedom that Christians, Jews and adherents of other faiths have long enjoyed in the United States.

"That includes the right to build a place of worship and a community centre on private property in Lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances. This is America, and our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakable," Obama said. But the next day, the President insisted: "I was not commenting and I will not comment on the wisdom of making a decision to put a mosque there."

Those who favored allowing the project to go forward gave their initial hurrahs to the President, but then criticized his backing away from the ringing endorsement of religious freedom. Opponents, particularly Republicans, have exploited what they see as an opening between Obama and Middle America on the meaning of 9-11 and the cultural war between much of Islam and the West. Sarah Palin and others have been insisting that Obama just doesn't "get it." Other Democrats are also straddling the fence on the issue. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who is in a tough race for reelection in Nevada, issued a statement similar to Obama's, affirming the right of people to build the center, but questioning the wisdom of it. Sen. Charles Schumer, Democrat of New York, has not taken a stand on the controversy.

The Republican strategy is, as Gov. Christie suggested, fraught with danger, since it may appear to many voters to be a sign of intolerance. While Muslims may not be a substantial voting block in most congressional districts, other minorities may worry if the GOP takes on the appearance of wanting to deny to minority groups property rights or the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Constitution. In New Hampshire, for example, Jim Bender, one of four Republican candidates for U.S. Senate, said Muslims do not need to build another "mosque" since there are already more than 100 Muslim worship sites in New York. New Yorkers and other Americans may well wonder if they would want a numerical cap on the number of houses of worship Catholics, Protestants or Jews might be permitted to build if such reasoning were adopted.



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