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August 25, 2010

Dr. Howard Dean
c/o Democracy for America
PO Box 1717
Burlington, VT 05402

Dear Dr. Dean,

I am writing on behalf of DC for Democracy, DFA's local chapter in the District of Columbia. Like other members of Democracy for America, many members of DC for Democracy are troubled by your response to the controversy over the building of an Islamic center in Manhattan near the location of the 9/11 attacks. I want you to know our feelings, and hope that you will consider these arguments.

You made it clear that you respect the right of Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and his followers to build an Islamic center in the vicinity of the Ground Zero site. But is it enough to say that you respect this community's rights, as you join others in encouraging them to move to another location? We believe it is not. Given a situation in which the Right's demagogues are fanning the flames of religious intolerance, we believe it is up to those who stand for religious freedom to defend that right *more* strongly. We realize that a number of officials, including Gov. Paterson, Majority Leader Reid and former Bush Undersecretary of State (for Public Diplomacy) Karen Hughes, have suggested moving the proposed site in the interest of avoiding further conflict, but we are forced to agree with the *Washington Post's* Richard Cohen (August 24) that "in this case, the difference between compromise and defeat is nonexistent." Following Mr. Cohen's argument, we believe that all moral leaders, whether religious or secular, should be urging not compromise, but rather greater tolerance from their followers.

Nor does there seem to be any good reason to second-guess the judgment of the people of Manhattan, whose community board undoubtedly weighed the arguments long before it became a national issue. We wholeheartedly agree with Rep. Carolyn Maloney: "I believe that preventing the project from being built would run counter to our proud constitutional rights of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom to assemble."

Secondly, there is the issue of Islam. Clearly, there is no connection between the 9/11 hijackers and the builders of the Cordoba Center. If there were, this group would not have secured the necessary permits to build there (for starters). Sen.

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Jeff Merkley may have said it best: “[O]ne question has not been adequately addressed: what makes a mosque near Ground Zero offensive.” When we hear no objections to any other construction projects, it is difficult not to conclude that this is a reaction against Islam. Rosemary Cain, a Long Island resident whose son died on 9/11, appears to have coined the phrase “slap in the face” that has been used repeatedly in recent weeks. Cain explained her opposition in a *New York Daily News* article on May 6, 2010:

“I think it's despicable. That's sacred ground. ... How could anybody give them permission to build a mosque there? It tarnishes the area.”

As much as we feel for her loss (her son was a NYC firefighter), it appears that she is unwilling to recognize any real distinction between Al Qaeda and the Muslim group that seeks to build in Lower Manhattan today. Rep. Jerry Nadler, who represents the district encompassing Ground Zero, responded in Friday's (August 20) *Washington Post*, “It's only a slap in the face if you think that the people in the congregation are responsible for al-Qaeda.”

Finally, we believe it is important not to ignore the ginned-up nature of this entire controversy. It is the vehemence of the emotion expressed by many opponents of the Cordoba House which has led to such sustained national media attention and which has, in turn, led cooler-minded national figures such as yourself to weigh in on this matter. Through the noise there has been some mention made of Imam Rauf's history as an official representative of moderate Islam during the Bush Administration. In Saturday's *New York Times*, Frank Rich (citing an article by Justin Elliott in *Salon*) pointed out that some conservative pundits started out in support of the Cordoba House project. Laura Ingraham, guest host for the *O'Reilly Factor* on December 9, 2009, interviewed Daisy Khan, the wife of Cordoba House's Imam Rauf. Ingraham concluded, “I can't find many people who really have a problem with it. ... I like what you're trying to do.”

You seem optimistic that Cordoba House can be moved to a suitable alternative location. We cannot imagine that finding affordable real estate in Manhattan is a particularly easy matter, but even if the Cordoba House is successfully and amicably relocated, we ask that you take some time to reflect on whose interests were truly served here.

Thank you for your consideration.

Jerry Clark, Chair
DC for Democracy