The controversy around the Islamic Center in Lower Manhattan has become the latest issue for right wing fear mongering and demagoguery, but it also demonstrates a few important things about the state of the Republican Party. The right wing of the Republican Party has found the proposed Islamic Center to be an excellent issue because it allows them to energize the party's intolerant base, while also allowing the party to position itself as the aggrieved victim of the liberal elite. According to the right wing narrative, opponents of the Islamic Center are victims because they are being portrayed as intolerant and prejudiced by supporters of the Center. In fairness, the Center has become an issue that can bring out the irrational side in Democrats, including Harry Reid and Howard Dean as well, but most of the real vitriol has come from the far right.

The degree to which the opposition to the Center has become the dominant view among Republican Party leaders is an indicator of how strong the base has become within the party, but it also shows how the influence of social conservatives in the party had eclipsed that of the party's foreign policy leadership. As Frank Rich has compellingly argued, opposition to the Center plays into the hands of those who would characterize the US as being at war with Islam, creating additional problems for beleaguered US war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as for general efforts to combat terrorism. If peaceful, moderate Muslims are shouted down in their attempt to exercise what is unambiguously their constitutional right, Islamist enemies of America will have a much easier time demonizing the US in the eyes of ordinary Muslims around the world. Accordingly, one can either be against the Center or one can believe that the US is locked in a serious battle with jihadist terror, but holding both these views is a logical inconsistency. It is increasingly clear what most of the Republican Party has chosen.

Fighting jihadist terror and being at war with Islam are, of course, two different things that can remain distinct from each other. The Bush and Obama administrations both went to great efforts to try to make it possible to maintain this distinction. Nonetheless, official statements that the US is not fighting against all of Islam and even the reality that Muslims enjoy more religious freedom in the US than in almost any other country in the world, something which both Presidents Bush and Obama have pointed out while in office, will be very easily overshadowed if this Islamic Center is not allowed to be built now. It has become almost a cliché to point out that the current Republican Party would have rejected Dwight Eisenhower or Ronald Reagan for being too liberal, but the debate over the Islamic Center suggests that they would reject George W. Bush on these grounds as well.

The persistency of right wing opposition to the Islamic Center is also evidence that the idea of smaller and more local government and the belief that local communities should be empowered to make decisions for themselves, allegedly a central tenet of the right wing is not all that important after all. The views, and voting habits, of the people of New York City have long been
something of an inconvenience to the right wing ideologues who fashion themselves as experts on September 11th and its impact; and the current controversy is no exception.

The local community board, a committee of ordinary citizens appointed by local elected officials approved the Islamic Center by a margin of 29-1. The decision by the body which best represents the people who live in Lower Manhattan, many of whom were very directly affected by the attacks of September 11th is all the more notable because Manhattan community boards are known for being opposed to most new projects. Given that, the enormous majority supporting the Center is particularly significant.

New York City's Republican mayor, Michael Bloomberg, also strongly supports building the Islamic Center. For good measure, Ed Koch a conservative Democratic former mayor of New York who frequently supports Republican candidates has also written in support of the proposed Islamic Center. Numerous other elected officials in New York have voiced their support for the project as well. Local elected officials are not, however, unanimous in their support for the Center. Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver who represents much of Lower Manhattan, for example, and beleaguered Governor David Paterson, have advocated for moving the Center.

It appears that, for the far right, the import of local opinion and the ability for local communities to make decisions for themselves only applies in communities that agree with the values of the far right. We know that, at least in the eyes of Sarah Palin, people in New York City don't qualify as "real Americans" living in "real America," so it should not come as a surprise that the right wing does not think the opinions of New Yorkers matter on this issue. Moreover, the right wing opposition to the center shows how the Republican Party has become so obsessed with the politics of intolerance even if only for its own sake, that positions such as support for local government, or even the ability of the US military to be successful overseas must take a back seat to the insatiable appetite of the Republican attack machine.