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 was1) (the “Tribute in Light” was first launched on March 11, 2002, for an initial period of one month).2) 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

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.”3) 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”).4) When first reported in December 2009,5) 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)6) caused little controversy, but staring in the early summer news of the project


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.