



COMMENTARY

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He Doesn't Deserve To Go

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Despite protests to the contrary, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran plans to visit ground zero in New York City, site of the 2001 terrorist attacks, while in town for the annual opening of the UN General Assembly. He also plans to take part in a discussion at Columbia University. The discussion is a great idea—he could benefit from a little democracy in action. We shouldn't be afraid of his ideas. But the visit to ground zero—pure political theater.

While the opening of the UN General Assembly every September should be about diplomacy and statesmanship, advancing collaboration around the world's most pressing problems, it is also a chance for national leaders to grandstand and play to a world audience. We only have to go back to last year, when President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela stood at the podium mocking President Bush, to remember how shamelessly the world body can be used by demagogues. While some heads of government will take their opportunity on the world stage seriously and substantively, others like Ahmadinejad, will go further and try to create as much drama as possible on their visit to the United States.

There are three issues at work in the drama that is international politics this week in New York. And if Ahmadinejad makes it to ground zero, we will all be watching.

First, Ahmadinejad knows the world is paying attention. But who is his target audience? Iranians at home where his popularity is in decline? Extremists he hopes to galvanize? Or is it Americans who he wants to impress and win over? Maybe all of the above. He's already proven that he understands the power of his actions and that this calculated move to "pay respects" at the site of the 9/11 attacks, as he put it, will be in every newspaper in America and on every news channel here and around the world.

Second, he wants to push our buttons. What better way than to visit the place that is seared in our memories as a horrific national catastrophe. He might have calculated that his trip to ground zero would divide Americans, pit our notion of civil rights and free speech against our national conscience. He misjudged this one. What is lost on him is the strength of our national ethic. Whether it's a Sunday football game, standing for the national anthem, or remembering the events of 9/11, Ahmadinejad has failed to understand how we come together as a nation over principle. Remember Representative Charles Rangel's defense of President Bush after Chavez's attack? Americans can go toe-to-toe with each other over just about every issue, but don't threaten our beliefs and the freedoms and truths we hold most dear. We'll protect those no matter what.

But the third issue at play here, which actually goes to the heart of being a national leader, is that Ahmadinejad thinks he has earned the right to go to ground zero. He is just dead wrong on this one. Here's a man—the leader of a proud and historic nation—who separates fact from reality with his despicable denials over the Holocaust and Israeli's right to exist, which are reasons enough to keep him from hallowed ground, but he continues to taunt the international community with his nuclear ambitions and support of the insurgency in Iraq. He has no assets in the bank as someone who is concerned about humanity.

It bothers us that Ahmadinejad wants to pay his respects, even though countless other world leaders have no doubt spent plenty of time touring the site over the years. Why does his gesture offend us? Plain and simple, and aside from politics, he doesn't measure up as a leader. We require a certain standard of leaders—that they demonstrate compassion, role-model good behavior, operate from fact-based knowledge, lead by example, and mirror our values.

President Ahmadinejad has a long way to go to pass this test.

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