



But is it News? The *New York Times* and the International Freedom Center Epilogue

The *New York Times* chose not to write about the Debra Burlingame op-ed and the immediate controversy it triggered. Instead, it waited until June 20, when it covered an anti-International Freedom Center (IFC) rally at Ground Zero. The June 21 article, written by Janon Fisher, was a “he-said/she-said” piece that quoted three opponents of the museum and two supporters.

The opponents, all family members of victims, included Burlingame, who asked:

Do we really want to entrust the meaning of September 11 to a man who is calling our secretary of defense, in a time of war, dishonorable and dishonest?¹

She was referring to IFC-advisor Anthony Romero, the executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The story said that about 200 people attended the rally and noted that, “All day long, signatures poured in on an Internet petition on the Web site takebackthememorial.com.”² The piece concluded with this paragraph:

“Three thousand people died on their way to work,” said Rita Riches, holding a photograph of her son, Firefighter Jimmy Riches. “That’s what this is about, nothing else. Absolutely nothing else.”³

The two museum supporters quoted in the piece were public officials. Mayor Michael Bloomberg said:

You are never going to please everybody. I don’t think any memorial is going to do what they would really like to have; clearly it’s not going to

¹ Janon Fisher, “Relatives Protest Plan for Museum at 9/11 Memorial Site,” *New York Times*, June 21, 2005.

² Janon Fisher, “Relatives Protest Plan for Museum at 9/11 Memorial Site.”

³ Janon Fisher, “Relatives Protest Plan for Museum at 9/11 Memorial Site.”

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bring back their loved ones. But we're trying to remember those who have passed and at the same time build for the future.⁴

John Cahill, appointed by Governor George Pataki to oversee development at Ground Zero, said:

It's important what we have here is not a place for political polemics, but a place to memorialize the history of man's march toward freedom and to remember the role that September 11 plays in that important march.⁵

The piece's second paragraph indirectly addressed the validity of the claims made by IFC opponents, but even that reference was studiously balanced:

Although plans for the museum, the International Freedom Center, have yet to be completed, its Web site (ifcwtc.org) said it would include an educational and cultural center "that will nurture a global conversation on freedom in our world today."⁶

Four days after the march, on June 24, Governor Pataki announced that he would do away with the IFC unless its organizers guaranteed to respect "the sanctity of the memorial site."⁷ IFC officials made that guarantee, but the campaign against the museum intensified. Throughout the summer and early fall, conservative activists and pundits, a contingent of 9/11 families, and the *New York Post's* editorial page blasted the IFC. They also targeted the Drawing Center, an art gallery that would share space with the IFC, for displaying allegedly anti-American artwork. The campaign against the Drawing Center and the campaign against the IFC reinforced each other and together created the impression that forces of anti-Americanism would dominate Ground Zero. Citing concerns about its independence and free expression, the Drawing Center pulled out—a victory for those who wanted nothing but a memorial at Ground Zero.

Opposition to the IFC broadened. The fire fighters' and police unions both came out against the museum. Then on September 24, one day after IFC officials had released updated plans, Senator Hillary Clinton said she opposed the IFC. Four days later, Governor Pataki evicted the IFC from Ground Zero, instructing museum officials to seek another site. In response, IFC officials announced that it would not relocate. The IFC was dead.

⁴ Janon Fisher, "Relatives Protest Plan for Museum at 9/11 Memorial Site."

⁵ Janon Fisher, "Relatives Protest Plan for Museum at 9/11 Memorial Site."

⁶ Janon Fisher, "Relatives Protest Plan for Museum at 9/11 Memorial Site."

⁷ Patrick D. Healy, Glenn Collins, Robin Pogrebin, and Jim Rutenberg, "Pataki Warns Cultural Groups for a Museum at Ground Zero," *New York Times*, June 25, 2005.