

We live in an astoundingly interconnected world. For evidence, look no further than the impact of a Florida pastor's plan to burn Korans on the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Since this act of collective bigotry was announced, thousands of Muslims have marched in protest around the world. At an angry rally in the streets of Kabul, Afghanistan, pastor Terry Jones was burned in effigy while the crowd chanted "death to America." In Indonesia, hundreds demonstrated outside the U.S. embassy and threatened violence if the burning takes place.

The members of Pastor Jones' church would likely tell you they support America's men and women in uniform. Yet as the Kabul protest and subsequent statements from Gen. David Petraeus have made clear, his event "is precisely the kind of action the Taliban uses and could cause significant problems -- not just here, but everywhere in the world we are engaged with the Islamic community."

Put differently, images of a Koran burning in Florida will be replayed around the world, inspiring impressionable young men in Afghanistan and elsewhere to take up arms against U.S. forces.

More than 5,000 Americans have given their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan, including 91 from my home state of Oregon. Honoring their sacrifice and supporting the troops still stationed in these countries goes beyond simply waving the flag. It means treating Muslims here at home with dignity and respect. Just as every American learned the phrase "loose lips sink ships" during the Second World War, Americans in a post-9/11 world must know that hateful words can sink our efforts to bring peace and stability to countries where Islam is practiced.

For all of my disagreements with George W. Bush, I appreciated the former President's fundamental understanding of this principle. In the fearful and angry days following the Sept. 11 attacks, he stressed that Islam – like Christianity and Judaism – is a religion of peace, and that America was fighting back against terrorists rather than Islam or those who practice it. When we burn the Koran, or when we trample the rights of Muslims to build a cultural center in Manhattan, we feed a cycle of religious intolerance that undermines our national security.

America's strategic interests at the moment hinge on our ability to settle conflicts fueled by religious differences. Beyond our efforts to defeat a Taliban regime that preaches a violent perversion of Islam, Americans are engaged in reconciling Sunni and Shiite factions in Iraq and efforts to bring lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. America cannot lead in resolving these conflicts if we engage in our own willful displays of religious hatred.

More than anything, Muslim Americans want to engage us in a meaningful dialogue that moves away from the image planted by violent extremists who would kill in the name of a peaceful religion. Regardless of our different faiths, all Americans can best honor our men and women in uniform by observing the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in a way that furthers this goal and keeps our troops out of harm's way.