

## EDITORIAL

Justice Stevens on 'Invidious Prejudice'

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A great deal of what public figures have said about the proposed Islamic cultural center near ground zero in Lower Manhattan has been aimed at playing off fear and intolerance for political gain. Former Justice John Paul Stevens of the Supreme Court, on the other hand, delivered one of the sanest and most instructive arguments for tolerance that we have heard in a long time.

Justice Stevens, who retired at the end of the court's last term, served for two and a half years as an intelligence officer in Pearl Harbor during World War II. In a speech on Thursday in Washington, he confessed his initial negative reaction decades later at seeing dozens of Japanese tourists visiting the U.S.S. Arizona memorial.

"Those people don't really belong here," he recalled thinking about the Japanese tourists. "We won the war. They lost it. We shouldn't allow them to celebrate their attack on Pearl Harbor even if it was one of their greatest victories."

But then Justice Stevens said that he recognized his mistake in "drawing inferences" about the group of tourists that might not apply to any of them. "The Japanese tourists were not responsible for what some of their countrymen did decades ago," he said, just as "the Muslims planning to build the mosque are not responsible for what an entirely different group of Muslims did on 9/11."

Many Muslims who pray in New York City mosques, he added, "may well have come to America to escape the intolerance of radicals like those who dominate the Taliban." Descendants of pilgrims "who came to America in the 17th century to escape religious persecutions" and helped establish our democracy should get that, he said.

Justice Stevens ended with a powerful message that participants in the debate over the mosque and community center in Lower Manhattan should heed: "Ignorance — that is to say, fear of the unknown — is the source of most invidious prejudice."