

The drama surrounding a congressional hearing Thursday -- to explore claims that U.S. Islamic groups aren't preventing terrorists from seducing the young or fully cooperating with law enforcement -- seems hyped and ominous to many American Muslims, including some in the Omaha area.

Rep. Peter King, who heads the House Homeland Security Committee, has ignited a national shoutfest -- Internet clamor, TV talk duels, street protests in his home state, the works -- by insisting that his committee publicize what he sees as a dereliction of patriotic duty.

The six-term Republican from New York has titled the hearing "The Extent of Radicalization in the American Muslim Community and That Community's Response" and says it will be the first of a series.

"These hearings are absolutely essential. I am facing reality. My critics are not," King said earlier this week, after his plan provoked pro and con rallies in New York and accusations of witch hunting from rights groups and editorialists. "I'm getting a lot of hostile phone calls now," including threats from overseas, he said, adding that his personal security has been tightened.

By tradition, lawmakers use congressional hearings as a spotlight, a tool to focus public attention. Many are tame, even dull. Nebraska **Rep. Lee Terry**, though not a member, said he was confident that the Homeland Security Committee "will have a measured debate which will not demonize any religion based on the actions of a few extreme members."

King said American Muslims should not feel threatened by his inquiry. And "if there is going to be animosity, I would blame it on my opponents," he said.

Critics say two things make his plan for hearings seem like a sad case of *déjà vu*:

- u In the 1950s, amid a similar climate of national dread, a Republican senator from Wisconsin galvanized the country with televised hearings into what he described as the communist infiltration of American institutions. His name came to stand for a political strategy -- McCarthyism -- in which vague accusations, usually involving an unpopular stereotype, are used to gin up public fervor and personal status.

- u King himself has used the plot before. In a 2004 novel he wrote, "Vale of Tears," a heroic congressman -- not coincidentally a Republican from New York -- struggles to thwart terrorist attacks on trains despite U.S. Muslim leaders who refuse to ferret out radicals in their midst. "Writing historical fiction," King told an interviewer when the book came out, "is my way of trying to make sense of what I've observed."

What Omaha-area Muslims are observing, said Dr. Syed Mohiuddin, a Creighton University cardiologist, is a baffling bit of political "theater" that seeks to blame all Muslims for the acts of a violent few -- and most likely will have the perverse effect of goading those few to greater hatred.

"What we're concerned about is it will further inflame people," said Mohiuddin, who's a board member for the Tri-Faith Initiative, a group planning to build an unusual center for Muslim-Christian-Jewish cooperation on a former golf course in west Omaha.

Like a number of King's critics, he cited a University of North Carolina study last month on terrorist plots involving American Muslims that have been thwarted since 9/11. The tipsters have been disclosed in 120 of the cases. In 48, they were fellow Muslims, often family members or friends of the plotters, the researchers said.

Fa'iz Rab, spokesman for the Islamic Center of Omaha, the oldest of the metro area's three mosques, said its members are puzzling over King's motives, which seem aimed at holding Muslims collectively responsible for the violent acts of a few individuals.

"It is kind of troubling that he's singling out Muslims," Rab said.

Thursday's hearing smells a bit like political soapboxing, he said, although "I don't want to name-call anybody." He added that Omaha's Muslim community -- about 5,000 people, he estimated -- has "a very good relationship with the FBI, open communications."

King has said "it would diffuse and water down" his inquiry to broaden it to non-Muslims. "It might be politically correct, but it makes no sense to talk about other types of extremism when the main threat to the United States today is talking about al-Qaida."

King also defended his probe as a way to protect Muslim Americans from feeling pressured to commit terrorist acts -- hence the hearing's focus on "that community's response." He has said he believes "over 80 percent of the mosques in this country are controlled by radical imams."

Critics ridicule that figure and cite university studies concluding that American mosques have a moderating effect on youths, that the alienated young Muslims to worry about are those who don't attend.

They also say King's talk dovetails with the rhetoric of groups such as ACT! for America, whose stated mission -- through books, media appearances and speeches -- is to rouse people to "fight the rising tide of Islamofascism and the political correctness that aids and abets it."

Although "the way it's framed is sad," said Bilal Khaleeq, an Omaha Muslim, Thursday's hearing does well to focus on a growing minority group.

"There are always positives that come out of things like this," he said. "And the positive here is that people are talking" and will be encouraged to look for themselves at Islam in America, at its above-average education level, its below-average divorce rate, its "family values."

Khaleeq said the Tri-Faith Initiative, during a board meeting Monday, encouraged members like him to call their legislators and express concern about the tenor of King's hearing.

Of the four Congress members from Nebraska and western Iowa, none is on King's committee. Offered a chance to comment, only Terry, a Republican who represents the Omaha area, responded.

He predicted a balanced discussion and said the hearing was important: "Terrorist plots against Americans increasingly -- and disturbingly -- involve U.S. residents. It is one of Congress' most basic responsibilities to examine threats to our security in any and all forms -- including homegrown terrorists."

Creighton University professor John Calvert, whose specialty is radical Islam, is less confident about balance. To a historian's eye, he said, the political landscape is too like the slippery slopes the country slid down into McCarthyism and the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

The hearing, he said, "plays into a climate of Islamaphobia."

