Pastor Terry Jones finally did it. His Florida church burned a copy of the Quran in March and led to riots in Afghanistan where 12 people died, mostly United Nations peacekeepers. He and his church members had the legal right to do it, but since last August, when they threatened to burn 200 copies of the Quran on Sept. 11, officials at the highest levels told Jones what the ramifications of this action would be. Even Defense Secretary Robert Gates explained to him over the phone that such an action would endanger U.S. soldiers there. Well the incited mob could not find any U.S. soldiers or other Americans, so they attacked the United Nations instead.

Now that one Quran burning has taken place, others will follow. Then, just like the riots that engulfed the Muslim world following the anti-Muhammad cartoons in 2006, more unrest will occur and more westerners will be killed. Is there anything we can do to prevent this? Maybe. Here are some possible actions:

First, we could arrest Terry Jones and the members of his congregation. Well, no we can't. In the United States, our two centuries of practicing the separation of church and state means that there are no laws against religious hatred or intolerance and no laws about religious desecration, insult or blasphemy. Any individual or any religious group has the right to the free practice of their beliefs as long as they are not harming other people.

Second, maybe our vaunted freedom of religion is too much for this age of the Internet, where someone with a cell phone can video any activity and post it on the web for anyone, anywhere to see. Since the video of the Quran burning “went viral” in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is not surprising that there was a lot of anger there.

Professor Dena Davis of the Cleveland-Marshall School of Law gives some insight from teaching in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country. She states that in countries where religious dominance is protected by law, our concept of individual religious freedom is incomprehensible. Concerning her Indonesian students, an observation applicable to Afghanistan as well, she writes, "To them, if a man gives plenty of warning that he is going to commit a [religious] outrage, and is not stopped, then the regime in power must be tacitly supporting him."

So maybe we should follow the lead of the Irish government last year. In the wake of the revealing by a national commission of widespread abuse of children by priests and employees of the Catholic Church, they passed an anti-defamation law. The reason was laudable, namely, to prevent the anger over a comparatively few evil doers from spilling over into public denigration of priests in general and the church at large. But it is a significant limitation of the freedom of speech.

That would never work in America. Our belief in the freedom of speech and religion is just too strong. Just witness the recent Supreme Court ruling allowing hate-filled protests at military burials.

Third, how about a different approach? Americans could burn Bibles to show that we are not prejudiced about the Quran. There could be a big bonfire into which we could throw all the different Bible translations, just for emphasis.

Or, as long as we are at it, we could burn some Buddhist Sutras, copies of the Hindu Mahabharata, and the Jewish Talmud. That would be extreme, and extremely disrespectful. But it would make the point that it is the words, the ideas and the beliefs which these books contain that are holy and important, not physical copies of the books themselves.

This approach would be legal, but I don't think it would actually convey the message. Many people, in this country and abroad, would simply interpret it as an anti-religious, atheistic act. And that interpretation would lead to reprisals of some sort. It certainly would inflame our own cultural debates here in America.

In the end, we need to remember that in many religions, the holy book itself is a sacred object and all copies of scripture are sacred. Believers in many religions have died to protect their sacred writings during times of attack and conflict. There is simply no way to avoid the reality that burning a sacred text is insulting and provocative. The term "sacred" itself indicates that, for it signifies a status higher than "important" and even higher than "revered."

Perhaps our only hope to prevent future conflagrations is to remember, paraphrasing a certain webslinger, "With great freedom comes great responsibility" - responsibility for the welfare of ourselves and others.

Flesher is director of UW's Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.