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President's missed chance with Sikhs
Decision to skip temple visit made out of fear, expediency

By Dawinder Sidhu

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Following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Sikhs in the United States have been murdered, stabbed, harassed, removed from airplanes, fired from jobs, and refused service in public establishments, among other things. This mistreatment is based on their appearance and is because Americans generally are unaware of Sikhs or Sikh identity.

Sikhs are members of a progressive, monotheistic religion founded in 15th century South Asia. Male Sikhs, who are required to cover their heads and refrain from cutting their hair, traditionally wear turbans and have beards. As Osama bin Laden also has a beard and wears a turban, Sikhs have been conflated with him and those responsible for the deadly terrorist attacks.

Several weeks ago, for example, a Seattle man assaulted a turbaned Sikh convenience store clerk, saying, "You're not even American, you're al-Qaeda. Go back to your country." More than nine years after the attacks, Sikhs are still mistaken for Muslims and subject to discriminatory treatment as a result.

But Sikhs received a glimmer of hope with official reports that President Barack Obama would visit the Golden Temple, the central place of worship for Sikhs, during his tour of India this week. This optimism was based on the presumption that reports and images of Mr. Obama with Sikhs would help quell ignorance and invite more positive perceptions of Sikhs in the United States.

Those hopes, however, have been shattered. The White House announced last week that Mr. Obama was canceling his trip to the Golden Temple for scheduling reasons. That Mr. Obama will not visit the site and allow the attendant benefits to follow is disappointing by itself. What's far more troubling is the possible real reason why he is skipping the Golden Temple.

Mr. Obama has faced lingering charges that he is Muslim, despite the fact that he is Christian. Because the president would have to cover his head while at the religious site, Mr. Obama reportedly was concerned that he will be tied to Islam and specifically that false allegations about his religion will gain additional traction. (The New York Times, for example, reported that "plans for a visit faltered over the question of how Mr. Obama would comply with a Sikh tradition requiring men to
cover their heads at a time when many Americans wrongly believe the president is a closet Muslim.”)

The president’s decision may have averted the misidentification problem, but it raises other, problematic questions about his priorities and his integrity. In bypassing the Golden Temple, President Obama signals that he is more interested in ensuring he does not lose political points than in potentially reducing the likelihood that Sikhs in the United States may continue to encounter hate and violence.

That Obama revisited his schedule suggests that the political right — both the Republican Party and its agents in the media — are sufficiently powerful to affect the president’s agenda (even before Tuesday’s election results).

This episode will only reinforce discontent among younger voters, like myself, who believed in President Obama’s vision. Obama the candidate sold us on the promise to transcend traditional politics. Obama the president, however, does not appear willing to rise above the dirt and baseless claims; indeed, in this case, he cowered in the face of them.

Obama the constitutional law professor would be mindful of the legal maxim that more speech is preferable to less speech. Applied to this situation, it would dictate that President Obama should visit the Golden Temple wearing a headscarf, and thereby send the critical message that Sikhs are perfectly acceptable people and that he will not be deterred by the specter of inaccurate representations about his religion.

The president can do Sikhs and himself a favor by standing firm — with the Sikh community and with his original plans.

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