THE TERROR ATTACK IN THE TEMPLE

Over at Lawfare yesterday, a Sikh Notre Dame professor, Naunihal Singh, argued that the media have treated the Oak Creek attack as a singularly Sikh tragedy, not an American one.

> The media has treated the shootings in Oak Creek very differently from those that happened just two weeks earlier in Aurora. Only one network sent an anchor to report live from Oak Creek, and none of the networks gave the murders in Wisconsin the kind of extensive coverage that the Colorado shootings received. The print media also quickly lost interest, with the story slipping from the front page of the New York *Times* after Tuesday. If you get all your news from "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report," you would have had no idea that anything had even happened on August 5th at all.
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> The tragic events in the Milwaukee suburb were also treated differently by political élites, many fewer of whom issued statements on the matter. While both Presidential candidates at least made public comments, neither visited, nor did they suspend campaigning in the state even for one day, as they did in Colorado. In fact, both candidates were in the vicinity this weekend and failed to appear. Obama hugged his children a little tighter after Aurora, but his remarks after Oak Creek referred to Sikhs as members of the "*broader* American family," like some distant relatives. Romney unsurprisingly gaffed, referring on Tuesday to "the people who lost their lives at that sheik temple." Because the shooting happened in Paul Ryan's district, the Romney campaign delayed announcement of

> its Vice-Presidential choice until after
> Ryan could attend the funerals for the
> victims, but he did not speak at the
> service and has said surprisingly little
> about the incident.
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> As a result, the massacre in Oak Creek
> is treated as a tragedy for Sikhs in
> America rather than a tragedy for all
> Americans. Unlike Aurora, which prompted
> nationwide mourning, Oak Creek has had
> such a limited impact that a number of
> people walking by the New York City
> vigil for the dead on Wednesday were
> confused, some never having heard of the
> killings in the first place.

I absolutely agree with his assessment of media
attention, and I agree that the differential
attention stems from real discomfort (which is a
polite word for ignorance, maybe) about Sikhism.
It was all the media could do to explain that
Sikhs weren't Muslim, by which I actually think
they meant well, but which betrayed horrible
things about their views both of Muslims and
turbans.

But I don't agree, exactly, that politicians
stayed away (or didn't publicize their
attendance at the memorial, in the case of Ryan)
because of their unfamiliarity with Sikhs. I
don't think any of the Presidential and Veep
candidates are as unfamiliar with Sikhs as the
media are, for example.

Rather, I think it has to do with the political
role of terrorism.

This was (assuming Wade Page chose his victims
out of racism) both emotionally and legally an
act of terrorism, whereas the Aurora shooting
was an emotional act of terrorism, but not one
the FBI would legally classify as such. But
Page's attack doesn't fit into the narrative of
terrorism that our politics has been structured
around for over a decade. That narrative says
any successful act of terrorism (except the big

one, 9/11) is a failure on the part of a politician. And that narrative also says that terrorists are the other.

Consider what that means for politicians. If Mitt and Ryan call this terrorism, they'll offend a great deal of their base, who believe only brown people wearing turbans can be terrorists—brown people certainly can't be victims of terrorism! And if Obama calls this terrorism, it means his government has failed to prevent another attack. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab or Nidal Hasan all over again, something that Dick Cheney and Pete Hoekstra can make political hay over. It also means a select group of white voters will have their belief that Obama's anti-white reinforced, because he considers whites (us) to be capable of terrorism (them).

Finally, they can't call it terrorism for another reason. Our entire post-9/11 system of surveillance depends on "the other" being the target of surveillance. We have to protect those threatening us from "outside," either geographically or culturally. That makes the excessiveness of the surveillance tolerable. It creates both the belief that "we" white people won't be the object of surveillance (that's not true, of course, but only the TSA makes that clear to people). And it allows the government to operate under the easy fiction that it's okay to surveil Muslims for First Amendment activities because religion and general speech are not the same as political speech, which is the protected right of white supremacists. The otherness of brown people creates the rationalization among the legal types that this surveillance is somehow different from J Edgar Hoover's abusive surveillance (and yes, I have seen this in OLC memos).

And finally, if the politicians admitted this was terrorism, they'd have to ask the same questions they asked about Nidal Hasan, why they didn't anticipate Wade Page's attack, particularly since he was more obviously

radicalized than Hasan. That would either lead to the necessity to subject white people to the same same level of surveillance as brown people—a political non-starter. Or, just as likely, it would lead to the conclusion not reached in the Hasan case: that while there are signs we should at least follow up on, no surveillance system will be perfect, and there was probably no way we were going to prevent Page (or maybe even Hasan's) attack. And that, in turn, would lead to the conclusion that much of the surveillance we conduct (certainly the wiretaps, in the case of Hasan, and most things short of HUMINT with white supremacists) aren't all that useful in preventing attacks.

All the logic of our national security narrative for over a decade has been premised on brown people in turbans being the agents of terrorism, not its victims. To admit that that narrative is false would very quickly lead an ambitious politician to impossible political positions.