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The Honorable Rick Womick
301 6th Avenue, North
Suite 207 War Memorial Building
Nashville, TN 37243

November 12, 2011

Re: Statements Regarding Muslims Serving in the Military

Dear Representative Womick:

As a national, nonpartisan, non-profit organization that elevates the voices and perspectives of South Asian individuals and organizations to build a more just and inclusive society in the United States, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) writes to express our deep concerns over your statements regarding Muslims serving in the military at the “Constitution or Sharia?” conference on November 11, 2011. **We ask that you publicly retract and apologize for your remarks in order to ensure that intolerance and xenophobia have no place in public discourse.**

On November 11, 2011, during a media interview at the conference hosted in Madison, Tennessee, you made the various remarks regarding Muslims serving in the military, including the following:

*Personally, I don't trust one Muslim in our military because they're commanded to lie to us through the term called Taqiyya. And if they truly are a devout Muslim, and follow the Quran and the Sunnah, then I feel threatened because they're commanded to kill me.*¹

When subsequently asked by the reporter whether Muslims should be forced out of the military, you responded, “*Absolutely, yeah.*” What is most unfortunate about your recent statements is that they have not been isolated. In fact, on April 26, 2011, you stated, “*[i]t's when you ... demand that our Constitution take an exception to your beliefs, whether it be Sharia law or Nazism or white supremacy, it doesn't make a difference.*”²

Your most recent statements raise serious concerns because they paint an entire community as disloyal and dangerous simply based upon their religious background. Such sentiments are reminiscent of an ignominious chapter of American history during which Japanese Americans during World War II were categorically characterized as enemies of the state. Your remarks also perpetuate the myth that Muslims jeopardize national security by casting Islam as an inherently violent religion. Moreover, as a state representative, your statements can also lead community members to feel a sense of alienation as they question whether their interests will be robustly represented by their elected officials simply because of their religion.

¹ “Rick Womick says devout Muslims should be removed from the military,” Chas Sisk, *The Tennessean: In Session Blog* (November 11, 2011). Available at <http://blogs.tennessean.com/politics/2011/rick-womic-tells-liberal-blog-muslims-should-be-removed-from-military/>. Full video from interview with ThinkProgress available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JnYAlnXaDA&feature=youtu.be>.

² Video of statement available at http://tnga.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=142&clip_id=4139.

When xenophobia and racism permeate the political sphere, there can be far-reaching consequences. Xenophobic rhetoric made by political and public figures can foster similar sentiments on the part of the public, and perpetuate misconceptions and stereotypes. It can also influence support for policies and practices that target or harm people of color and immigrants. Finally, such rhetoric can further feelings of marginalization and hamper political and civic participation for immigrants and communities of color.

Over the past ten years, SAALT has observed an alarming increase in insensitive and xenophobic statements in political discourse. SAALT has compiled a range of comments and statements targeting South Asians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus in its report, ***From Macacas to Turban Toppers: The Rise in Xenophobic and Racist Rhetoric in American Political Discourse***.³ As South Asians seek to become more involved in American life, we hope that elected officials, policymakers, and civic leaders will promote an environment that welcomes the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences rather than one that condones xenophobia. We call upon your office to ensure that there is no place for intolerance in the political sphere and retract and apologize for your comments. We would welcome the opportunity to speak with you to provide further information about the South Asian community. Please feel free to contact our Policy Director, Priya Murthy, at 301-270-1855 or via email at priya@saalt.org.

Sincerely,



Deepa Iyer, Esq.
Executive Director



Priya Murthy, Esq.
Policy Director

³ Report available at <http://saalt.org/attachments/1/From%20Macacas%20to%20Turban%20Toppers%20Report.small.pdf>