

The Washington Post
October 11, 2001

EDITORIAL: AN UGLY APPEAL

AFTER A FLAP erupted over his offensive observation that any airline passenger wearing "a diaper on his head" should be "pulled over" for extra questioning by airport security personnel, Louisiana Rep. John Cooksey issued an apology. Then he went on the House floor to declare his opposition to harassment of Sikhs, **Muslims** and Arab Americans. Then he put together a commercial that went right back to the ugly posture of singling people out for suspicion based on appearance and ethnic background. "Recently, my words were too tough, but my beliefs are still strong," he says in the spot that aired during the LSU-Florida game and is prominently displayed on the Web site for his 2002 Senate campaign. "We know the faces of terrorists and where they're from. Terrorist profiling is essential for our nation's security." As air travel began to resume following the Sept. 11 attacks, several incidents were reported in which passengers of Middle Eastern origin or appearance were removed from planes. Utah's attorney general threatened to sue Northwest Airlines over one such event, and was shocked when his office was flooded with angry messages attacking his defense of the passengers. "I really thought we had moved beyond this in America," he said. Perhaps that's what the president of Delta Airlines thought, too, when he sent a message to his airline's employees reminding them that security concerns should focus on passengers' conduct, not race or national origin. "Don't let last Tuesday's event change you into someone suspicious of people just because of the way they look," Delta president Fred Reid wrote. "If you do that, then the terrorists will have won."

Never mind that Rep. Cooksey's position is wrongheaded as a matter of law enforcement; there are millions of Arabs and Arab Americans who travel, and targeting all of them would mean targeting no one. What's more important is that Rep. Cooksey is inflaming fears and bigotry that he should be fighting. It's no off-the-cuff remark this time but a carefully crafted ad. His campaign is reported to be planning to continue to air it over the next two weeks, at a total cost of nearly \$ 200,000. That ought to give voters plenty of time to recognize that they're seeing an appeal to prejudice and **stereotype** that is unworthy of a member of Congress. And plenty of reason to reject his bid for higher office.