

Who Took the Rap? A Call to Action

RUSSELL C. LEONG

Each decade challenges Americans to once again examine their own experiences and responses to crisis, to their constitution, and to their civil rights. When the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed on that fateful September 11, 2001 after being hit by hijacked American airplanes, ordinary Americans like you or me reacted strongly.

Who Took the Rap?

Unfortunately, complex feelings of grief, anger, revenge, and disbelief were often targeted at brown-skinned people of Arab, Asian, or even Latino descent living in the U.S., or at those who were wearing a turban or perceived as Muslim. Hate crimes, beatings, and indiscriminate epithets directed against individuals and groups associated with Arab, South Asian, and Islamic communities occurred in cities and towns throughout the nation. Many politicians, mass media, and even some lawyers proposed the curtailment of some civil, and even constitutional rights in the aftermath of 9/11.

Should Americans Accept Racial Profiling after 9/11?

According to Asian American journalist Helen Zia, “each day after September 11 has brought on some new uncertainty — and some new erosion of the principles that have made our country great. Yesterday, it was the argument of Peggy Noonan, a *Wall Street Journal* columnist who claimed that we must all ‘accept the necessity of racial profiling.’ She said that all Americans have to sacrifice some of our liberties in this post-September 11 world.”

Do you agree or disagree with Noonan?

I, for one, do not agree, and it’s not because I am Asian American, or that I work as an editor or as a teacher at UCLA. Bottom line, I believe that extraordinary times of social danger and instability demand even stronger, and “extra” protection to ensure the constitutional rights and civil liberties of all those who live in America. We must all work harder to achieve this.

True, all Americans are living in extraordinary times with pressures and the conflicts of war, the economy, and politics that challenge our day-to-day lives and thinking. Nonetheless, we must turn our fears into hope and our hope into action to protect what America stands for, including the civil, legal, and human rights of all those who now live in America.

Americans therefore cannot accept being racially, religiously or ethnically profiled — just because of the color of their skin, their immigration history or their religion.

And can Americans stand by while the civil liberties of others are taken away, violated, degraded or disregarded?

Ask yourself this question.

This is just what Bill Ong Hing, a law professor at UC Davis, did in his article, “Defending the Unpopular Immigrant.” In his essay he talks about representing and working with persons and families that are “among the most unpopular groups in the United States today — undocumented immigrants from

Mexico and legal residents who have been convicted of crimes.”

Why Choose Justice Over Discrimination?

As Hing states, “we are a nation of immigrants, yet we are also a nation that goes through evil cycles of anti-immigrant fervor.”

Bill Hing is an Asian American who is very much a typical American. He was born in the small town of Superior, Arizona, a small copper mining community that is mostly Mexican American. Bill’s first languages were Spanish and English, and his Mexican neighbors reminded him of the Chinese migrants he had grown up with and known as well. In his work as a lawyer, Bill often represents Spanish-speaking clients, both immigrant and undocumented individuals alike in their quest for freedom and justice.

As a young immigration attorney, Bill worked in San Francisco, and there worked with many so-called Asian gang members from ordinary working class families. In the 1990s, he also represented clients from Southeast Asia, Cambodia, specifically.

After September 11, 2001, however, immigrant communities, both legal and undocumented individuals of Arab, Sikh, Pakistani, and Latino descent, were targeted. Hate-motivated incidents and hate crimes directed at these groups increased. In this atmosphere, those former gang youth and those who had been convicted of any felony crime were also targeted for deportation even after they had served their time.

Bill Hing strongly believes everyone deserves a second chance, and no person or family should be profiled because of their race, religion or current immigration status. As an immigration attorney, Bill works to assure that all are given the opportunity to secure justice and freedom.

How do South Asian Americans Create Community?

*“We must turn our fears into hope,
and our hope into action.”*

The 9/11 attacks triggered a new backlash of discrimination and violence against members of Arab, Muslim, and South Asian American communities. These attacks occurred throughout the U.S.: from Manhattan to San Jose, from Tulsa to Providence, R.I., to Gary, Indiana to Salt Lake City, and elsewhere. Sikh Americans, often mistaken as Muslim due to their wearing of turbans and beards as part of their religion, were, according to Karen Narasaki, “the victims of 133 reported hate crimes in just the first five days following the September 11 attacks.”

In her essay, Narasaki, executive director of the Asian American Justice Center, documents the case of Amric Singh Rathour, an American-born Sikh. Most Americans are unaware of this small, yet vibrant South Asian community... a community that experienced post-9/11 discrimination and violence because of mistaken identity. The Sikh religion traces its origin to Punjab, located in present-day Pakistan and northern India. Sikh men wear turbans as part of their religious faith. This reading focuses on the issue of religious discrimination and one man’s challenge to confront discrimination in the workplace.

Amric Singh Rathour wanted to practice his religion and be a New York police officer. He learned the importance of reaching out to others and gaining their support. During the case, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist leaders showed public support for Rathour. The Sikh Coalition, founded to protect Sikhs after 9/11, also helped by garnering the support of law agencies throughout the world in which turbaned Sikhs have been part of the police force including the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and the London Metropolitan Police. Finally, Rathour won his case because of support by a broad range of religious and civil rights groups.

Rathour’s case was not the only one of discrimination against Sikhs after September 11, 2001. Nonetheless, by taking action to safeguard his civil rights,

he was helping to pave the way for other ordinary Americans to safeguard their own legal and societal rights.

Can Youth Stand Up Against Racial, Religious and Sexual Profiling?

Today, all across the U.S., young people in high schools and colleges are becoming involved in their own communities and standing up for the civil, religious and legal rights of others in relation to what they believe. They are challenging the racial stereotypes and profiling of many groups, including Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Asians, Arabs and Muslims, gays and lesbians, and even of stereotypes of themselves as “Generation Y.”

They are talking and marching as well as making their own music, writing their own lyrics and messages, posting their own ideas and feelings on the internet.

For today, music and culture can play a crucial role in powerfully shaping peoples’ ideas about the present and the future. As writer and former UCLA student Jeff Chang says: “The hip-hop generation can play a crucial moral role in the call for peace — peace on the streets where we live and a global peace free from terror.”

To better the world through rap. So, to all American youth, I would like to dedicate the poem I wrote above on September 11, 2001. I truly believe that words, music, and stories can also lead us to the path of liberation from fear and terror. Words and music can move the spirit and link our actions through space, time and generation.

There are many untold stories and new heroes for this generation. What is YOUR story? How will you tell your story? And how will you turn ideas into actions?

“Can Americans stand by while the civil liberties of others are taken away, violated, degraded, or disregarded?”