



**TOPIC: From Outrage to Organizing: The Impact of the Vincent Chin Case**  
**GRADES: 8-12**

### **BACKGROUND ESSAY**

The 1982 murder of Vincent Chin represents a pivotal moment in civil rights history. It is the first time that federal hate crime laws are used in a case involving an Asian American victim. The legacy of his death continues to reverberate today, and remains a call to those seeking justice for hate crimes.

During the 1980s, the U.S. economy was in decline due to the 1970s international oil crisis and hit the American auto industry hard. Due to increased gas prices, American consumers began gravitating towards more fuel-efficient Japanese cars. This economic downturn of the U.S. auto industry and the trade war between Japan and the United States caused an increase in anti-Asian sentiment.

Within this backdrop, two White auto workers, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, assumed Vincent was of Japanese descent and hurled racial insults at a bar, saying, "It's because of you [profanity] that we are out of work!" A fight began but was quickly broken up. After both parties left, Ebens and Nitz searched for Vincent and beat him with a baseball bat. Vincent's final words were "It isn't fair." He died four days later while in a coma.

In the murder trial, Ebens and Nitz pled guilty to manslaughter. Judge Kaufman sentenced them to three years' probation and a \$3,000 fine because it was deemed as nothing more than a simple barroom brawl. Given the severity of the crime, the light sentence galvanized the Asian American community across the country to fight against this injustice. Activists pushed for federal hate crime laws to apply to the case. These laws were first enacted as a statute within the Civil Rights Act of 1968, a landmark law signed by President Lyndon Johnson in the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination and as an extension of the Civil Rights Act of

1964. This made it a crime to use or threaten to use force against an individual on the basis of race, religion, or natural origin. Although constitutional legal scholars said that this was meant to protect African Americans, protests convinced the Justice Department otherwise.

In 1984, a federal civil rights case found Ebens guilty, but was later overturned in a 1986 appeal. Nitz was acquitted in both trials. They never served a day in jail for Chin's murder. However, the case was a seminal one as it served to further define what constitutes a hate crime, which is now determined by who the victim is as well as who the perpetrator believes one to be.

The legacy of the Vincent Chin case has inspired generations of Asian Americans to stand up against anti-Asian racism, bringing them together in solidarity within the community and across racial lines.

### **VOCABULARY**

- **Civil rights:** A set of fundamental rights for everyone, including equal treatment under the law, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other personal characteristics
- **Hate crime:** when a crime is committed or conspired to be committed on the basis of a person's specific characteristics. In most states, characteristics include race, color, religion, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or disability. At the federal level all these characteristics are included as well as national origin.
- **Xenophobia:** Fear and prejudice of strangers or foreigners, leading to resentment and hatred.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- How did the socioeconomic conditions of the United States in 1982 create an environment for anti-Asian violence?
- When Ronald Ebens said "It's because of you [profanity] that we are out of work" how was he stereotyping Asian Americans such as Vincent Chin? What are the effects and consequences on Asian Americans when they are seen in this way? How might this kind of stereotyping impact other communities?
- In the words of Vincent Chin, what was "not fair"?
- Ebens and Nitz were sentenced to three years' probation and a \$3,000 fine for the murder of Vincent Chin. Do you think this is fair? Why or why not?
- How did Vincent Chin's murder and the movement to seek justice for him impact many Asian Americans?
- What parallels are there between Chin's murder and how Asian Americans have been perceived and treated in other parts of history? What parallels are there to today?

### **ACTIVITIES**

#### **Activity 1: Understanding Hate Crimes**

Tell students to work in pairs to write their own definition of the term 'hate crime'. Give each pair the opportunity to share their definition with the class.

Have students familiarize themselves with the federal definition of a hate crime. The primary federal hate crimes statute was enacted in the Civil Rights Act of 1968 and still stands today. It defines a hate crime as occurring when someone “by force or threat of force willfully injures, intimidates or interferes with, or attempts to injure, intimidate or interfere with . . . any person because of his race, color, religion, familial status, disability, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or national origin” ([18 U.S. Code Section 245](#))

In order to understand the importance of having a hate crime law, students will investigate what made the Vincent Chin case a hate crime by answering the following question as a written response:

- Think about all the details of the murder of Vincent Chin. According to the federal definition of a hate crime, what about this incident made it a hate crime? Why do you think it’s more beneficial for those seeking justice for Chin to label it as a hate crime?

Pair students up and have them share their responses.

Conduct a short discussion about their responses and the following questions:

### **Activity 2: Fighting Discrimination, Past & Present**

Read Viet Thanh Nguyen’s statement from the clip with students:

“I think the Vincent Chin murder was shocking to a lot of Asian Americans. Not because it represented something new, but that it actually represented something old. It reminded Asian Americans that progress hadn’t really been made.”

Tell students to create a T-chart on a sheet of paper and label one side of the chart, “Asian American History;” this will represent the “old” things that Viet Nguyen referred to in the quote. Label the other side of the chart, “Vincent Chin Murder;” this will represent the “new” things that Nguyen referred to in the quote.

Instruct students to consider why Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz attacked Vincent Chin and what their racial bias was against people of Asian descent. Then have students write down their responses in the “Vincent Chin Murder” column.

Instruct students to consider the history of anti-Asian racism that Nguyen referred to from the clip. Write down the images and incidents that happened to Asian Americans in the past in the “Asian American History” column.

### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

- Storycorps, ["Remembering Vincent Chin, who was murdered because of his race"](#)
- “Learn About Hate Crimes.” *U.S. Department of Justice*. <https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/learn-about-hate-crimes/chart>.



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