

The Case Against Profiling

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The question of profiling has often entered the avenues of mainstream discourse since the attacks of September 11th, 2001. Politicians and pundits have argued that profiling based on race, ethnicity, and religion could be a way to protect the nation against future terrorist attacks. Arabs, Muslims, immigrants and other groups perceived as such have been the primary targets of this ill-conceived strategy. To fully understand the reasons why profiling will not make our world more secure, we must investigate the consequences it holds for its victims, explore its cultural impact on American society, and expand our concept of security beyond the narrow framework created by the government and the media.

The strategy of profiling has created untold suffering for its victims. Following the September 11th attacks, thousands of Arab and Muslim immigrants were subject to unlawful detention by the US Government. Those detained were never charged with any involvement in unlawful activities, becoming prisoners simply because of their ethnicity and religious beliefs. Members of targeted communities have also faced hate violence, and discrimination by employers, individuals, and institutions. Children of immigrants have become afraid to go to school due to harassment. Sarah Eltantawi, the director of research and policy for the Muslim Public Affairs Council describes the immigrant experience:

It's the death of the American dream. To immigrants, the American Dream means believing that you could say whatever you wanted. My

family came here from Egypt believing that America would be more free.

Now there is a profound sense of betrayal and disappointment in the American dream.

When we as a society say that it is acceptable for groups of people to be targeted because of their race, ethnicity, or religion, we open the door for bigotry and intolerance. There was anti-immigrant sentiment in America prior to 9/11, but since then it has increased exponentially. Less than a week after the Twin Towers were destroyed, a Sikh gas station owner named Balbir Singh Sodhi was murdered in Mesa, Arizona. His murderer subsequently visited another gas station, this one owned by Arabs, and fired twenty shots, although not succeeding in killing anyone else. The vulgar racist who carried out this violence claimed it was an act of patriotism. Although mainstream advocates of profiling do not condone these actions, we cannot help but see them as linked. If we are to say that is moral to judge every member of a group by the actions of a few, hate crimes are inevitable. It did not matter to the man who murdered Balbir Singh Sodhi that he was a Sikh, not a Muslim. If we do not take a firm stand against all forms of racial and religious prejudice and affirm the humanity of all, the ideology of hate will continue.

When the voices on television tell us that racial, ethnic, and religious profiling make the world more secure, we must ask for whom this security is created. The thousands of Arab and Muslim immigrants detained with no charge brought against them in the wake of September 11th are not more secure. The thousands of immigrants who have been victims of hate crimes are not more secure. Balbir Singh Sodhi is not more

secure. It is clear that profiling as a method to improve security is inherently unjust because it is exclusively a tool of the powerful - obvious from the U.S. government's handling of the Oklahoma City bombing, White Christian males are never the victims of these tactics. At first, the media scrambled to find a link from the bombing to the Middle East, but when it was revealed that the terrorist guilty of this atrocity was Timothy McVeigh, no one suggested that White men should be profiled. No one suggested that their constitutional rights should be suspended to further the fight against terrorism. Profiling is a tool of oppression against traditionally marginalized groups and it should be abolished.

Security must be defined in a broader sense than simply the absence of terrorist attacks. Perhaps if we lived in a fascist state where all members of groups statistically likely to participate in terrorism were imprisoned, we would have "security," as defined by the War on Terror. However, this narrow definition of security is quite obviously flawed. The only way real security can be achieved for all is to acknowledge our interdependence and cultivate a mutual respect for the lives of others. Real security means not being perceived as a criminal simply because of one's race or religion. Real security means having a government that respects the universal human rights of all. Real security means having a society where racial, ethnic, and religious minorities are not demonized and viewed as 'other,' but rather as part of the same humanity. The only way to create a secure world is to strive for a society in which people care for each other and stand up for each other, even when they are not personally at risk. German pastor and social activist Martin Niemoller wrote:

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a communist;
Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a socialist;
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a trade unionist;
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Jew;
Then they came for me—
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

It must be said that the paradigm of profiling is quite similar to that behind Osama bin Laden's terrorist attacks. When the World Trade Center was attacked, bin Laden did not care about the suffering of innocent people. To him, all Americans were the enemy. If in the wake of this tragedy, we employ the same kind of thinking, then we have truly lost our way. If we say it is acceptable to target the innocent simply because they are Arabs, Muslims, immigrants, African-Americans, or any other group that faces profiling, then we are utilizing the very ideology which we claim to so detest. It is only a firm and active stance against this dehumanizing paradigm that can bring us all to a more secure world.

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