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Racial, Ethnic & Religious Profiling and World Security

An African-American is stopped for “DWB” (driving while black) in a predominantly white neighborhood. Classmates ask a Muslim student why her religion condones the murder of innocent people. A South Asian man is singled out, frisked and humiliated in an airport because his skin tone matches that of perceived “terrorists.” On April 19, 1995, a murderer nearly escaped notice on the part of law enforcement because bombing a federal building was the arena of Muslim terrorists, not white Christian Gulf War veterans. In 2003, a pair of sniper serial killers went free for weeks because the profile of a serial killer is that of a young, lone white male, not a pair of African-American men.

Since the declaration of the War on Drugs and, more recently, the War on Terror, thousands of men and women have had their lives disrupted and even ruined because of who they are, what they look like and what they believe. This is done in the name of security. When a police officer pulls over a black driver, they are going on the assumption that black drivers are more likely to be “up to no good.” Muslim extremists have perpetrated the majority of terrorist attacks of late (so the public believes), so logic must dictate that if we pay close attention to Muslims, we can be more secure.

However, many so-called security checks border on the ridiculous. On December 22, 2005, a federal judge ruled against the American Civil Liberties Union in a case relating to the treatment of several Muslims returning from a moderate Islamic function in Canada. The citizens were held for six hours and fingerprinted by authorities. It now

seems like even a simple religious observance (but of course only Islam; if it had been a Methodist gathering, no one would have batted an eye) can be grounds for being treated a criminal. The First Amendment clearly states that American citizens have the right to practice their religion as they see fit. They should be able to practice their religions without worrying about being detained in LaGuardia based on their beliefs.

It is a sad state of affairs when the courts, those in charge of interpreting the Constitution, decide that collective security is more important than collective rights. That is the biggest dilemma surrounding the racial profiling debate. Is it worth humiliation and wrongful suspicion if it helps keep people safe? Benjamin Franklin is famous for saying that a loss of liberty in exchange for a temporary sense of security is a poor trade, and that is certainly the case today. What is the point of attempting to ensure security if the rights of citizens are crushed along the way?

When considering the need for security, it must be asked just what it *is* that needs to be secured. It is common rhetoric of demagogues to claim that our very way of life is threatened by “terrorism.” The problem with the War on Terror is that it’s a war waged on an idea, on an abstract. This war will not end with the fall of one cell, one leader or even one country. This conflict is a strong throwback to George Orwell’s threat of constant, unending war in *1984*. Governments can easily use fear to gain power, and it is much easier to do this when there’s a scapegoat for global problems. In this day and age, scapegoats are found in racial minorities and certain religions, namely Islam.

It is often argued that if a person isn’t doing anything wrong, they should have no fear of being investigated. This misses the point entirely. The fact remains that any



American citizen or foreign national deserves to be treated with respect and viewed without prejudice or suspicion for as long as they don't pose a demonstrable threat. No one is suggesting that armed and dangerous criminals not be detained because of their race, but if a member of a 'target' group (blacks, Muslims, etc.) is going about their business and not behaving in a manner befitting an outlaw, they should be allowed to proceed without being harassed. What sort of a country defends its freedom by denying freedom to those that call it home? How can we expect citizens to grin and bear it while still rosily saying the Pledge of Allegiance after we accuse them of being in league with our enemies?

Racial profiling also betrays the sheer laziness of law enforcement. If news stories are run showing detained blacks and Muslims, the public is made to feel somehow safer because they are under the impression that minority groups commit most crimes. A safe public is a happy public, and law enforcement officials sustain this false sense of security by repeatedly backing up the stereotype that these groups are somehow the "bad guys."

Relying on racial prejudices is a practice that's carried out when security officials can't be bothered to investigate cases properly. They could have had a wide net cast in 1995 to catch Timothy McVeigh sooner, but instead went with the popular opinion that the Oklahoma City bombing must have been carried out by Muslim extremists (they always bomb things, don't they?). Instead of being progressive and seeing other angles, they ran with the accepted serial killer profile in 2003, which allowed the Beltway Snipers a longer crime spree.

In these two paramount scenarios, racial profiling not only failed to improve security, it hindered it greatly. Yes, stereotypes are stereotypes for a reason, and there are doubtlessly historical incidents that have minority groups as villains. However, the acts of a few should not hinder the rights of the many. Globalization and social assimilation have all but shattered previously held assumptions of different races and religions.

The white race slaughtered millions in its imperialist quests for power, far fewer than have ever been killed by a terrorist's bomb. Yes, a few Muslims kill in the name of religious extremism, but what were the Crusaders fighting for? In the name of what did the Spanish ruthlessly exterminate whole societies in the Americas? Didn't Eric Rudolph believe he was doing God's work when he bombed the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta? Religious violence is not the soul domain of Muslims, and to presume that it is is to deny other religions (namely Christianity) a place in the hall of shame. Do we treat Caucasian Christians like terrorists at airports, follow them in department stores or pull them over because we feel like it? Of course not.

There will always be religious extremists and criminals in every race and every religion. However, to assume that anyone who belongs to a suspicious group is automatically a criminal is narrow-minded and simple. It is also absurd to hold a race or religion's crimes higher than another's, or to turn a blind eye to historical oppression by the dominant race and religion. Everyone sins equally, and no innocent person should ever be subjected to disgrace and degradation just to ease the minds of a controlling, dominant so-called security force.



Racial, ethnic and religious profiling does not make the world safer. It dumbs security down to its basest form, that in which someone who looks or believes differently is automatically a threat. It distracts law enforcement from truly examining a situation and properly investigating it. Rather than promote security, profiling only hinders it by limiting the free range of thought and analysis when it comes to tracking down and recognizing dangerous individuals. The only thing that profiling has left in its wake is a path of destroyed lives, sustained hatred and prejudice and broken promises. It only simplifies our society, when in truth our world is so complex and intricate that it is owed more than to be preserved on the shoulders of a weak-minded, hate-filled and fear-mongering archaic practice.

Bibliography

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