

Allen Eghrari
First Place, Asian American Awareness Month Essay Competition 2002

2797 people confirmed dead, their bodies identified by grief-stricken family members. 116 missing, whose families still wait for the bodies of their loved ones to be found. Four planes, exploited that morning as tools of mass destruction. Two towers that once stood tall and represented hopes, possibilities and dreams. On September 11, after a relatively long period of domestic peace, one nation recognized the true face of terror.

As the aforementioned events took place, many children across the United States were beginning their school day with the Pledge of Allegiance, describing our nation as “indivisible.” Yet the days and weeks to come tested the strength and ability of the country to remain unified. Americans began to redefine their identities, their loyalties, and their roles in this global civilization.

As the war on terrorism escalated to what was purported as the ultimate battle of good vs. evil, we began to question the true definition of “American.” Who is “us” and who is “them”? As a nation, we faced an identity crisis, apparent in the immediate backlash toward those who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent. Asian-Pacific-Americans were included as a part of this attack; later that same day, a shooting rampage in Mesa, Arizona left a Sikh man dead, targeted because he wore a turban; young girls who covered their hair in accordance with traditional Islamic teachings were maliciously harassed. For some citizens of this country, failure to assimilate into the status quo was seen as failure to be American. Moreover, the loyalty of individuals was put into question. Fear that “terrorists are among us” made targets out of law-abiding citizens.

However, when we examine our history, we realize that this is not something new. Since the formation of this country, many citizens have faced segregation and discrimination. Even recently, when Matt Fong ran in 1998 for the U.S. Senate in California, reporters on several instances asked him which side he would pick if he were a senator and China attacked the U.S. Never mind that he was a fourth-generation Californian whose mother served as Secretary of State from 1975 to 1994.

It's clearly evident that these sentiments live deep-rooted in our society and culture. So what does this mean about September 11? It implies that the attacks did not necessarily create hatred; rather, they brought much of it to the surface from the depths in which it lied dormant. For many Americans, including Asian-Pacific Americans, it provided a chance to reflect on frustrations and issues that had long been around but pushed aside as supposedly trivial. We see that many minority American groups encounter similar prejudice; the sentiments produced by the Wen Ho Lee case a few years ago are now being felt primarily in the Muslim community, as the media provides an often sensationalist viewpoint rather than pure fact.

As a society, however, this means we can move forward. Thirty years ago, an educational psychologist named Lawrence Kohlberg created the stages of moral development that today bear his name. He stated that as we grow older, there are stages by which we conduct our moral reasoning, and that the only way to advance in our thought processes from one step to another is to encounter moral dilemmas, to think and analyze the solution, and to realize that there is a better, deeper perspective in making judgements.

America today is in its adolescence. It is maturing, and after some growth spurts that have placed it taller than others, it is still adapting to its lifestyle. September 11 served as a reminder that we need to analyze the way we think, because many of the black-or-white values

that we had as a child are now defined by gray lines. We realize that many of the beliefs we were raised with may need to be renewed, adapted or even changed. One of the most important of these beliefs is how we define an American.

And so out of the clouds of smoke there is hope. For with the nasty backlash of racism there have been efforts to reach out and bridge the connections that have needed to be made. As we look to our government in this time of need, we realize the diversity upon which this country was built. When we see the efforts made to pick up the remnants after the attack, we observe not just Caucasians, but people of every color, race and ethnicity.

Things are far from perfect, but America is slowly learning what “American” really is.