

## CITIZENSHIP AND COMMUNITY

**Russian roulette**

The paranoia against Russians during the Cold War reminds us of how quickly we return to our senses once a frenzy of bigotry dies down. But it is also a reminder of the worst we are capable of.

BY EBOO PATEL, NOVEMBER 28, 2007

There is a man who stands on North Michigan Avenue in Chicago with a sign that says Russian spies are everywhere. Teenagers scoff at him, tourists take pictures and laugh, local businessmen elbow him out of their way as they hurry past.

But I pay attention to him.

I remember my grade-school years during the Reagan era, when movies like Red Dawn riled my friends and me up, had us planning how we would take out the Russians when they arrived on our shores, or came out of the trees in our backyard. "Russian" was the insult hurled at whoever happened to be unpopular on the playground that day, a precursor to a gang tackle and pummeling.

These days, however, it seems ludicrous to think of ordinary Russians as our enemies. We understand that we were fighting a regime, not a people. Now, when they hear the word "Russian", young people are more likely to think of Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google, rather than Nikita Khrushchev.

Which is precisely why we should be paying attention to the man with the sign - he is a useful reminder of how quickly most of us return to our senses once a frenzy of bigotry dies down. But he is also a reminder of what is worst in us, of the times when we stereotype an entire race or religion or ethnicity by the actions of its criminals.

The name that kids are called on the playground today before being gang-tackled and pummeled is "Muslim". And the bullying does not stop there. It is being done by people who should know better in quarters that are supposed to be more responsible.

In the world of media and books, Muslims are increasingly portrayed as a potential fifth column, a threat that lives next door. Commentators like Daniel Pipes spread crazy notions like "Sudden Jihad Syndrome", whereby your normal Muslim neighbor who works at the local car dealership goes berserk and murders you in your driveway. Books by former Muslims that blame Islam for everything bad in their lives and the world become bestsellers by providing an "insider's account" of the evils of the faith. Prominent anchors like CNN's Glenn Beck claim to speak for the masses when he challenges Representative Keith Ellison, a Congressperson from Minnesota who happens to be Muslim American: "Prove to me that you are not working with our enemies".

Their fear mongering is having an impact. Last year, a Gallup poll found serious prejudice against Muslims. About 40 % of Americans admit to feeling bias against Muslims, and about the same number support increased security measures applicable only to Muslims, like carrying a special identity card. This climate is at least partially responsible for the spike in hate crimes against Muslims, which are according to FBI statistics up a dramatic 400% from the years 2000 to 2005, a period which otherwise saw a general decline in religiously-motivated hate crimes.

In this climate, the fear that Muslim Americans, and many government officials, live with is this: how bad will the backlash be in the event of another terrorist attack, regardless of whether the perpetrators are part of the Christian Identity movement or al Qaeda?

Recently, the Pew Research Center released a report which found that Muslims in America were "largely assimilated, happy with their lives, and moderate with respect to many of the issues that have divided Muslims and Westerners around the world."

In other words, a largely immigrant community distinguished by its religious belief is attempting to enfranchise itself in this nation through the age-old methods of hard work and patriotic commitment, and an industry of people has emerged to block their progress by speciously linking them with criminals who happen to share a part of their identity.

A recent report by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs on Muslim Americans (disclosure: I was on the Task Force) makes the crucial point that the challenges Muslims face are not just the problem of a minority community, they are a violation of America's ideals and a threat to her strength. For centuries, this country has uniquely stood for the idea that people from different backgrounds can live in equal dignity and mutual loyalty within a single national community. Our worst moments have been when we disenfranchise entire groups based on irrational fear. My voice is hoarse from condemning terrorists who have perverted my beloved religion, and so are the voices of all the Muslim Americans I know. But it will take all of our voices, insisting on the American ideal of pluralism, to defeat our real enemy. If there is one thing that extremists who perpetrate acts of terror in the name of Islam hate it is the idea of a place where people of all backgrounds thrive. I fear for my community in these times, but I mourn for my nation, because I believe her most cherished principles are seriously under threat. The poison of bigotry is never satisfied with infecting only one group, it always seeks to spread, and it inevitably winds up diminishing us all.

I long for the time when that man on North Michigan Avenue holds a sign that says Muslim terrorists are everywhere, and people scoff dismissively.

I long for America to be America again.

Eboo Patel is founder and executive director of the [Interfaith Youth Core](#) and the author of *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*.



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