

## THE GREEN MENACE: MCCARTHYISM AFTER 9/11

Vijay Prashad



Everybody who looks like a terrorist has a story after 9/11. We've been removed from airplanes, strip-searched in train stations, stared at by fellow travelers, gawked at by terrified children, borne animosity on the tender surface of our tawny skin.

To look like a terrorist after 9/11 is guilt itself.

Ordinary and extraordinary people who look like terrorists are removed from aircrafts: film stars like Kamal Haasan and Aamir Khan, businessmen like Vijay Mallaya, writers like Tariq Ali, Ahmed Rashid, and Rohinton Mistry. Almost all of those who have been removed from aircrafts because they look like terrorists have been men.

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And mainly men faced the wrath of a crowd who sees them as terrorists: Sikh men, Muslim men, South and West Asian men.

Women faced hostility in different spaces, generally not as routine assaults by those emboldened to be vigilantes for 9/11. But there are also women who faced the crowd: Meera Kumar, on September 12, 2001, was removed from an Amtrak train in Boston; in Huntington, New York, an elderly drunk driver tried to run down a Pakistani woman, followed her into a store and threatened to kill her because she's "destroying my country"; in Los Angeles, on September 13, 2001, an Iranian woman was punched in the eye by another woman who wanted to register her displeasure at Arabs; on September 15, 2001, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Kimberly Lowe, a Creek Native American, stopped her car to confront a group of white males who had yelled, "Go back to your own coun-

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**VIJAY PRASHAD** is Associate Professor of International Relations at Trinity College. He is the author of six books and co-founder of the Forum of Indian Leftist.

try," when they pinned her down and then drove over her till she died.

She was mistaken for the wrong kind of Indian.

Within minutes after the World Trade Center bombing, angry white men yelled obscenities and chased Amrik Singh Chawla of Brooklyn, New York, down the street. His only escape was to hide his turban in his briefcase. They went after him for his turban. The government had not yet said anything about Osama Bin Laden, and yet ordinary Americans knew that the turban signified the soldiers of terror. For this reason, Sikhs suffered the brunt of the early attacks, for weeks after 9/11. Within a few days, Sikh community organizations and civil rights groups reported over fifty attacks against Sikhs.

On September 14<sup>th</sup> in New York, at a meeting to discuss hate crimes, organized by the South Asian Journalists Association, a man who was talking his baby on a walk assaulted one of the Sikh participants. "You Islamic mosquitoes should be killed," he yelled, a phrase captured by TV Asia. Manga Singh, a taxi driver, reported to New York Taxi Workers' Alliance that a passenger started to beat him with an umbrella while yelling, "I hate you. I hate you and your turban." Mr. Singh's father, Surinder Singh, is also a taxi driver and he reported that a rider said to him, "You did that, you attacked the World Trade Center." A white man assaulted an elderly Sikh man who was then taken to the hospital, just as unknown assailants firebombed a Sikh gurudwara near Cleveland, Ohio. Balbir Singh Sodhi, a worker at an all-night store, was shot to death in Mesa, Arizona by a man who told the police, "I stand for America all the way."

Hours after Mr. Sodhi was found dead, an unknown assailant shot Waqar Hassan of Dallas, Texas. Mr. Hassan was at work as a store clerk at Mom's Grocery when he was shot. Mosques joined gurudwaras in the saturnalia of random violence, just as South and West Asians of all faiths began to join Sikhs as targets of retaliation for the WTC.

The bulk of the attacks took place not against all those who are of West and South Asian descent, but against the working-class and small merchant sector amongst us. Those who worked the lonely, long-hour jobs at kiosks or in taxis faced the wrath of their customers, while the ethnic neighborhoods (generally peopled by the working class) became a visible tar-

get for retaliation.

Many professionals do not identify with victims of hate crimes because they are so infrequently affected. Perhaps they should. Mr. Ashraf Khan, for instance, is a cell-phone magnate. He was removed from a first-class seat on a Delta Airlines aircraft because the pilot felt that he endangered the plane. "I had a first-class ticket," Mr. Khan told National Public Radio, as if this should have secured him against racism. The fear set in amongst all classes, even as the working-class bore the brunt of the retaliatory violence. The volume of the attacks was not enormous, and yet a general sense of fear pervaded South and West Asians in the U.S. Many refused to leave their homes, to go to work or to school, and many foreign students got on the first plane back to their homelands.<sup>1</sup>

Things got so bad so fast that President George W. Bush made an appearance at a Washington, DC mosque on September 17<sup>th</sup> to mollify South Asians and Arabs, as well as to say "those who feel they can intimidate our fellow Americans by taking out their anger, they don't represent the best of America." The U.S. media began to run stories about how ordinary Muslims did not feel kin with the WTC attacks, indeed that most Muslims condemned them and that Islam is a faith of peace.

Bush's statement, however, was made hollow the next day by Attorney General John Ashcroft's announcement, informing the country that whereas previously the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) could only hold an "alien that had been taken into custody because of a violation" for twenty-four hours, the new regulation would allow the INS to hold the alien for "forty-eight hours, or to an additional reasonable time." In one swoop, the Justice Department suspended the right of habeas corpus for non-citizens of the US, and it allowed officers of the law to turn any alleged violation (not a guilty verdict) into an excuse for indefinite detention. Ashcroft's rules have made official the tenor of the unofficial attacks on West and South Asians. In November, the U.S. government passed the USA Patriot Act that allowed authorities to take undue liberties with immigrants. And, in late November, Bush announced an executive order to try suspected terrorists who are not citizens in military tribunals (that is, without the protections and public scrutiny of civilian courts).<sup>2</sup> The domestic war uses the

World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks as pretext for the increased repression of certain population groups, whether those of color or else those who dissent from the right-wing thrust in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

Now, how do we understand the state's attempt to denigrate these acts of racism against those of us who look like terrorists, and how do we answer the charge that airlines, for example, now check people at random and not because of how they look? There are old, white folk who are pulled out of line, whereas a dusky desi walks past, afraid within, but not challenged at that moment: someone can point to that moment and say that there is no racism post-9/11, indeed there is not enough racial profiling to create security. How do we locate the acts of racism and the structures of post-9/11 oppression given these contradictory stories -- the virulence against the dusky and the solemn attempts to appear unbiased in security?

### **Racial Profiling**

Right after the first instances of post-9/11 racism, many of us began to draw the comparisons with racial profiling. We fit the security services' profile of a terrorist and they apprehended us with their glares or with their handcuffs. For a moment, all those who looked like terrorists knew that blacks had understated the virulence of racial profiling.

As a category, "racial profiling" emerged in the 1990s to explain the acts of the police in their dealings with people of color, mainly Blacks and Latinos. Decades of protests against the racist behavior of the police finally earned vindication when the White House accepted the prevalence of discrimination. On June 9, 1999, President Bill Clinton released his "Memorandum on Fairness in Law Enforcement. Memorandum for the Secretary of the Treasury, the Attorney General, the Secretary of the Interior." It demanded a comprehensive account of the acts of the government in its relations with people of color.

While Clinton evinced "great confidence in our Federal law enforcement officers," he underscored that the nation could not "tolerate officers who cross the line and abuse their position by mistreating law-abiding individuals or who bring their own racial bias to the job. No person should be subject to excessive force, and no person should be targeted by law

enforcement because of the color of his or her skin." To address the problem of racial profiling, Clinton asked first for the collection of data "to better define the scope of the problem. Tracking the race, ethnicity, and gender of those who are stopped or searched by law enforcement will help to determine where problems exist, and guide the development of solutions." He demanded that all federal agencies collect data based on race, ethnicity and gender. Furthermore, Clinton called upon the federal agencies to "provide a report to me [the President] on your training programs, policies, and practices regarding the use of race, ethnicity, and gender in your law enforcement activities, along with recommendations for improving those programs, policies, and practices."

The Clinton Memorandum forthrightly condemned "racial profiling," even as its policy initiatives remained mainly at the level of data collection. Without the data it is hard to make a case for oppression, so this was a marked step forward. A few days later, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) published a report that established quite effectively the routine racism of the nation's police.<sup>4</sup> A year later, the US government's Office of Civil Rights corroborated the ACLU's report with a scathing indictment of police practice.<sup>5</sup> Despite the conclusive evidence of the problem, the White House did not act.

The entry of the Republicans into the White House ended the official dithering over profiling...by shelving the problem. Bush's own "Memorandum for the Attorney General on Racial Profiling," released on February 28, 2001 took a step back from the Clinton position. He talked about profiling, but did not openly condemn the practice. We are back to the necessity for data collection: "I hereby direct you to review the use by Federal law enforcement authorities of race as a factor in conducting stops, searches, and other investigative procedures. In particular, I ask that you work with Congress to develop methods or mechanisms to collect any relevant data from Federal law enforcement agencies and work in cooperation with State and local law enforcement, in order to assess the extent and nature of any such practices. I further direct that you report back to me with your findings and recommendations for the improvement of the just and equal administration of our Nation's laws." Faced with such recalcitrance, Representative John Conyers (Dem-Michigan) introduced HR 2074 (Racial Profiling Act of 2001) to the House on June 6, 2001. The bill sought to make racial profiling cog-

nizable, and it offered a very clear and radical definition of "racial profiling":

The term "racial profiling" means the practice of a law enforcement agent relying, to any degree, on race, ethnicity, or national origin in selecting which individuals to subject to routine investigatory activities, or in deciding upon the scope and substance of law enforcement activity following the initial routine investigatory activity, except that racial profiling does not include reliance on such criteria in combination with other identifying factors when the law enforcement agent is seeking to apprehend a specific suspect whose race, ethnicity, or national origin is part of the description of the suspect (Section 501).

Conyers' description of racial profiling perfectly fit the post-9/11 acts of racism against those of us who look like terrorists.

Even as we suffered the indignity of the glare and the momentary inconvenience, we did not get arrested in large numbers or taken, as yet, to internment or concentration camps.<sup>6</sup> So we are profiled by the security services here and there, but we do not experience widespread social oppression at the hands of the state to the degree that has become normal for U.S. Blacks.

### **McCarthyism**

Within days of 9/11, the U.S. security services began to arrest those whom it suspected of being part of al-Qaeda. While the government did not reveal the numbers of those it arrested or the reasons for the arrests, accounts from the prisoners and from their advocates tell us a little of them. Reports indicate that the government arrested at least two thousand people, many under the U.S.A. Patriot Act and therefore without habeas corpus provisions. Most of these people are men, most of them Muslims, most of them formally on INS violations, and many of them already deported to their homelands (or at least to the places for which they held passports).

What were the government's criteria for these arrests? From the few stories, it appears that the government played a game of six degrees of separation, picking up anyone who knew anyone who knew one of the hijackers or worshipped in a

mosque that they attended, or else whose names appeared in their address books, or else whose names came up in the interrogation of anyone picked up for these reasons, or again, if they had been under the government's dragnet, as radical Islamists. And then there are those who became accidental radical Islamists - Muslim pilots, Muslim students with expired visas, and Muslim youth with criminal records.

In her monumental study of McCarthyism, historian Ellen Schrecker writes:

*It was the most widespread and longest lasting wave of political repression in American history. In order to eliminate the alleged threat of domestic Communism, a broad coalition of politicians, bureaucrats, and other anticommunist activists hounded an entire generation of radicals and their associates, destroying lives, careers, and all the institutions that offered a left-wing alternative to mainstream politics and culture. That anticommunist crusade - McCarthyism - dominated American politics during the late 1940s and 1950s. It used all the power of the state to turn dissent into disloyalty and, in the process, drastically narrowed the spectrum of acceptable political debate.<sup>7</sup>*

The repression post-9/11 is akin to McCarthyism, but here the target is not Communism, but Islam - and ancillary to it, all political ideologies that challenge the hegemony of imperialist globalization. If guilt by association became acceptable due to McCarthyism, it returns once again after 9/11 to make those who are Muslim culpable for 9/11.

And by doing so, it erases the role played by imperialist globalization in the manufacture of those who conducted 9/11: Bin Laden was a Saudi asset well loved by the CIA until the U.S. Army marched into Saudi Arabia in 1990; most of al-Qaeda comes from among the ultra-right Islamic organizations set-up with U.S.-Saudi money in the 1960s and 1970s in their effort to thwart radical nationalism (under the flag of Egypt's Nasser) and of Communism in the oil lands.<sup>8</sup> While this history does not justify 9/11, it makes it clear that it was not the act of a crazy and unpredictable foe. Rather, it should help us understand that al-Qaeda does not emerge from thin air, simply seething with anti-American sentiment.

Those of us who look like terrorists, but are not Muslims, seem to want to carry a sign that says, "I am not a Muslim," as if to say, "I am not a terrorist."

What we miss is that as Islam becomes imperialist globalization's Green Menace, "Muslim" has come to stand in for those who look or sound like immigrants.

So if Muslim stands in for immigrant, we should follow French philosopher Etienne Balibar's insistence that immigration "becomes the main name given to race within the crisis-torn nations of the post-colonial era."<sup>9</sup>

And, since 1996, immigrant in the U.S. has become more and more associated with criminal, so that we now have a chain of associations around the Muslim: Islam-Immigrant-Criminal-Barbarian.

All Muslims are suspects by association, but those who had come into even fleeting contact with the organs of Islamic radicalism are fair game for arrest and interrogation.

Many who are not Muslims try to tell the country that *they* are not the bad ones, that being Sikh or Hindu or even atheists *they* should not be harassed. But the gaze of imperial whiteness does not discriminate between the dusky bodies. In *its* eyes, we are all Muslims.

Because of the power of the state and the media, we are not immune to this logic. We have begun to see ourselves through their eyes. As we walk down the street, whatever our religion or provenance, we wonder whether those around us see us as a problem. "Mom, look at the terrorist, I'm frightened!"

Like McCarthyism, the main agent for social oppression is not the state, but it is private institutions and our neighbors.<sup>10</sup> The state allows them to act in this way, and does its work through their preying eyes.<sup>11</sup> These are terrible times when you see yourself as hateful through the eyes of your neighbor.

### **The Gangrene**

The disease of post-9/11 racism spreads across the body politic, leaving little unscathed.

As reports of the attacks against those who look like terrorists piled up, the polling agencies went to work to see how the "average American" viewed their security.

James Zogby, an Arab American and owner of a famous polling house, ran a poll between September 25, 2001 and October 8, 2001 - over forty percent of those polled felt that it was acceptable to profile those who looked like terrorists, this to ensure the safety of the "general public." When the Gallup organization asked its pool of respondents if they favored intensive security checks in airports for those who look like terrorists, six in ten people responded in the affirmative.

The polls themselves, however, did not clearly indicate that the respondents accepted "racial profiling" for those who look like terrorists. The questions they answered asked if they felt that scrutiny of Arabs would prevent further 9/11s. At one level this is a question of fact, not a judgment of value.

The most striking part of the poll conducted by Zogby on September 30, 2001 showed that almost sixty percent of African Americans favored special scrutiny of those who look like terrorists. On October 2, The Boston Globe reported that just over seventy percent of African Americans it polled favored discriminatory checks at airports on all Arabs, including those who are U.S. citizens. Polls across the country affirmed that African Americans agreed with the state's exertions against those who look like terrorists.

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While the media reported these polls, it did not pay much attention to the strong statements against racist scrutiny made by the largest black organizations. For instance, Hugh Price, President of the Urban League, offered a strong analysis of the polls. "We should see in these polls' findings more evidence of the perniciousness of racial profiling itself, no matter how it's seemingly bolstered by glib or urgently declared rationalizations. These polls show that whenever people speak in favor of racial profiling, they always favor its use against some other group, not theirs."

But the polls seemed to be in line with another hurtful development: the enthusiastic support President Bush's post-9/11 security reforms gained from the Congressional Black

Caucus, from the Congressional Progressive Caucus and from most elected officials with otherwise good records on race and racism. The wall of infamy is long, but what startled us was that one feisty rebel, John Conyers, an African American, co-sponsored the U.S.A. Patriot Act in the House. This is the same Conyers who sponsored the bill against racial profiling!

A rejoinder to this outrage came from Congressman and former Black Panther Bobby Rush, who said, "I knew I was casting my vote against J. Edgar Hoover, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan. Once this crisis is over, they're not going to be looking for Osama Bin Laden or people who look like Arabs. As usual, they're going to be looking for you and me."

The gangrene of post-9/11 oppression is not restricted to those of us who look like terrorists.

In fact, anti-black racism did not stop. As I commute to work, I tend to go above the speed limit, eager to spend as much time with my daughter. I've never been pulled over, mainly because the side of the freeway is littered with the detritus of anti-black racism. A series of policemen stand behind a row of black men, those heroes who run interference for my own illegality. They did not earn a respite in the state's virulent racism.

The modern ostrich, head in the sand, unable to fly, to soar with imagination and anger to reverse the gangrene in our world. Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1844) denounced her "Ostrich age, which exposes its own eggs, and then hides its head in the sand [as] really quite monstrous." Our "Ostrich Age" is far worse, far more unrelenting in its production of fear and sadness.

At least the ostrich, native to Africa, can run fast, soaring across the African landmass with dreams of its own. And the ostrich does not put its head in the sand.



1. A very useful list was produced by Stephen Lee for the *Amerasia Journal* special issue entitled "After Words: Who Speaks on War, Justice and Peace?" vol. 27, no. 3, 2001 and vol. 28, no. 1, 2002, pp. 311-317. The most comprehensive report on hate crimes after 9/11 is Human Rights Watch, "We Are Not the Enemy" Hate Crimes Against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to be Arab or Muslim after September 11, New York: HRW, November 2002 (vol. 14, no. 6, G).

2. On the suspension of rules for those held as terrorists, see Barbara Olshansky, *Secret Trials and Executions: Military Tribunals and the Threat to Democracy*, 2002.
3. On the attack on dissent in general, see Nancy Chang, *Silencing Political Dissent: How Post-September 11 Anti-Terrorism Measures Threaten Our Civil Liberties*, 2002.
4. David Harris, *Driving While Black: Racial Profiling on Our Nation's Highways*, American Civil Liberties Union Special Report, June 1999.
5. U.S. Government, Office of Civil Rights, *Who is Guarding the Guardians? A Report on Police Practices and Civil Rights in America*, Washington, DC: OCR, November 2000.
6. In 1991, in the throes of the Gulf War, then U.S. Representative Norman Mineta (now head of Transportation in GWB's administration) "pointed to a 1987 contingency plan the FBI and the Immigration and Naturalization Service drew up to detain Arab Americans at a camp in Oakdale, La., in the event of war with certain Arab states. Mineta said that plan could still be initiated to 'round up' Arab Americans." *Sacramento Bee*, January 24, 1991.
7. Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*, 1998, p. x.
8. I tell the story in *War Against the Planet: The Fifth Afghan War, Imperialism and Other Assorted Fundamentalisms*, 2002 and in synoptic form in "Tolerance of Arabia," *Colorlines*, Spring 2002.
9. Etienne Balibar, "Racism and Nationalism," in Balibar and Wallerstein, eds., *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, 1991, p. 51. A few months before I read Balibar's words, I heard General Norman Schwarzkopf on NBC news February 27, 1991), "Iraqis are not part of the same human race as we are."
10. A Detroit poll in 2001 reported that while almost seventy percent of respondents said that the war on terrorism is not a war on Islam or Arab Americans, sixteen percent said it was a war on Islam and Arabs and another sixteen percent preferred to remain undecided. Dennis Niemiec and Shawn Windsor, "Arab Americans expect scrutiny, feel sting of bias," *Detroit Free Press*, October 1, 2001. If one in three of my neighbors think this is an endless war on Islam and on Arabs, and if most of them see all of us as Muslims anyway, the prognosis is scary.
10. John Ashcroft's TIPS program aimed to make this unofficial policy official. There are a host of stories of those who look like terrorists being "turned in" by neighbors, by co-workers, by anyone who has a grudge to enact.