

# Twenty Years After 9/11: One of the Uglier Legacies Has Gotten Worse

*Helio Fred Garcia, President, Logos Consulting Group*

About a week after the 9/11 attack, I noticed an alarming pattern: A surge of hate crimes against people perceived to be Muslim or Arab. What seemed to be patriotism was really nationalism wrapped in a patriotic flag.

I felt sufficiently alarmed that I felt called to sound the alarm. But twenty years ago there were no blogs, and CommPRO.biz, and similar platforms did not yet exist. So I sent my first and only mass email on a divisive social issue to my entire contact list.

Soon after 9/11, as President George W. Bush rallied the nation, Americans felt the need to wear the American flag on their lapels, and to wave the flag whenever they could. But a predictable and unintended consequence was the use of the flag as a weapon – symbolically and physically. As I said at the time,

“We lose – American society loses – when we resort to evil in the name of our flag, when we view innocents as undeserving of sympathy, dignity, or humanity simply because they’re Muslim, or Arab, or Asian. The terrorists distorted the values of Islam by attacking us. We distort American values when we attack innocents.”

This was not the beginning of a dangerous trend, but the re-emergence of one. It led inevitably 19 years later to insurrectionists using flagpoles carrying the Stars and Stripes as lances to assault Capitol police officers.

I began studying the trend twenty years ago, and last year my book: *Words on Fire: The Power of Incendiary Language and How to Confront It* showed how Donald Trump's rhetoric was the natural extension of that dangerous trend.

On the 9/11 anniversary we are admonished never to forget. I never will. But it is also important for engaged citizens and civic leaders to never forget that even the better angels of our nature sometimes battle with our own worst demons. Sometimes the demons win, with potentially devastating consequences.

...

***The following was originally published as a mass e-mail on September 21, 2001.***

I'm not wearing an American flag on my lapel today. It's not that I'm unpatriotic. Rather, I fear the unintended, but fully predictable, consequences of well-intentioned patriotism.

Waving the flag is powerful symbolism. It can stand for loyalty and solidarity in times of crisis, but it can also stand for aggression against people simply because they are perceived to be different. Since last week we've seen troubling signs of ugliness in the name of Old Glory. Soon after the terrorist attack we saw innocent Muslim women and children, whose mosque windows had just been shot out, taunted by thugs waving American flags and cheering USA! USA! Asked by a television reporter what he was doing, one thug proclaimed, "Supporting the US of A ."

An Arizona man shot and killed a Sikh gas station owner and tried to kill a man of Lebanese descent and another of Afghan descent. As he was arrested the assailant justified his rampage shouting, "I stand for America all the way." Another Sikh was killed with a baseball bat soon after the terrorist attack. The two Sikhs who were murdered were neither Muslim nor Arab, but they wore turbans. Because many Americans don't

have a nuanced view of foreigners, anyone who looks South-Asian is at risk.

Frankly, our country doesn't have a very good track record at mobilizing the masses against a foreign threat. Solidarity quickly mingles with and morphs into aggression and leads to suspension of our most cherished values. After Pearl Harbor thousands of innocent and patriotic Americans of Japanese descent lost their liberty and property and were held behind barbed wire for years.

In 1916 – just as President Wilson rallied the country to go to war in Europe – my grandfather, along with hundreds of others, was fired from a major auto company because he was German. (He established Chilean citizenship and changed his name from Hesse to Garcia and got his job back, an option unavailable to those persecuted because of their appearance.)

The World Trade Center and Pentagon terrorists were evil not just because of the enormity of the death and destruction they caused. They were evil because they viewed their targets as undeserving of sympathy, dignity, or humanity. We lose – American society loses – when we resort to evil in the name of our flag, when we view innocents as undeserving of sympathy, dignity, or humanity simply because they're Muslim, or Arab, or Asian. The terrorists distorted the values of Islam by attacking us. We distort American values when we attack innocents.

Now is the time to focus on what unites rather than on what divides. But the idolaters of the flag focus too much on *unum* and too little on *pluribus*. It's more important that we come together as people than that we come together as a people.

So what am I wearing on my lapel? A world religions pin. It has a Christian cross. And the star and crescent of Islam. And a Star of David. And also symbols of Buddhism and Hinduism and my own faith, Unitarian Universalism. The pin reminds us of

what the great faith traditions have in common. Their collective wisdom and their emphasis on our mutual humanity are what America, at its best, really stands for.

---



***About the Author:*** Helio Fred Garcia is President of Logos Consulting Group and teaches ethics, crisis, leadership, and communication at New York University and Columbia University. His most recent book is *Words on Fire: The Power of Incendiary Language and How to*

*Confront It.*