

## **Capitol P for Privilege**

I can remember when the world changed before my eyes. I was only four years old; however, the aftershock lasted a lifetime. I watched as the skin colour Brown went from human to terrorist with just one incident. Brown skin, beards, turbans, and hijabs no longer represented the culture they stood for; now, they provoked fear in strangers on the streets. I recall a story my brother once told me. My brother is 6'4", has a beard, and is Brown. He used to live in Berkeley, California, where he attended the University of California, Berkeley. Often, he would walk home alone at night, typically wearing hoodies with the hood up. He noticed that people walking toward him would move to the other side of the road when they started to approach. During COVID, we might see it as normal behaviour to maintain our distance; however, this was a few years ago. The fear of Brown skin, a beard, or even a hoodie was evident in people's reactions.

September 11, 2001 was a world-changing event. The Islamic extremist group al Qaeda hijacked four planes to carry out suicide attacks in the United States. Hijackers flew two of the aircraft into the World Trade Center's twin towers in New York City, a third plane hit the Pentagon just outside Washington, D.C., and the fourth crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. As a Brown child living in America at this time, I carry this day with me forever. There was international outrage that such an attack could happen against a strong country like the United States. Being raised in a Sikh household where my papa (father) and Nanu (grandfather) wear turbans, the aftermath of 9/11 was terrifying. Everything I knew turned into symbols of violence. The number of Brown people in the U.S. being attacked, harassed, even murdered was at an all-time high.

The attacks on Brown people after 9/11 are, in themselves, domestic terrorist attacks, yet the media would and still does see skin colour as a symbol of terrorism. My

papa travelled a lot for work and, as a child, that is where my anxiety developed. Airports became the 'home' of terrorists after 9/11. Everyone looked at Brown people in airports differently, as if they were going to set off a bomb right then and there. I feared that, like many other Brown people in America, my papa would be a target. There are many intersecting factors in experiencing racism; however, luck is the biggest one.

One morning, there was a story on the news about a Sikh man who had been pushed in front of a train because a white man believed he was a Muslim terrorist. This story was ingrained in my brain, and I thought about it every time my papa would leave for work, go to the store, or even take us to the park. I was about eight years old at the time of this horrendous attack on an innocent man, four years after the attack on September 11th. The way Brown people were treated, even years after 9/11, changed how we lived forever. I wanted to ask my papa to stop wearing a turban because I could not imagine losing him to an angry white person who could not tell the difference between a Muslim and a Sikh if it hit them in the face. Though, of course, I only say that because of the ignorance in hate crimes, not because Muslims deserve hate over Sikhs. I only say that because of the ignorance involved in such hate crimes. If someone truly feared Muslims, they would educate themselves on what they are scared of; however, the fear of culture is secondary to that of skin colour.

I cannot help but compare the aftermath of 9/11 to the Capitol's domestic terrorist attack carried out by supporters of the former President of the United States, Donald Trump. The morning the riots took place, I was visiting my family in California. CNN was on in the family room when I came downstairs for my morning coffee. We usually spent one or two hours watching the news, but that day was no ordinary day. We watched as Trump encouraged his supporters to storm the Capitol building. We watched as many

white Americans broke into Government buildings, stole government property, and chanted to hang the vice president. We watched ‘patriots’ drop the American flag to the ground to hang a ‘Trump’ flag in its place. That is not patriotism—growing up, Americans are all taught that you never let the flag touch the ground. A Trump supporter expressed at the Capitol riot that they are not democrats or republicans but ‘Trumpers.’

Donald Trump’s administration ran off the notion that there needs to be ‘law and order,’ yet his supporters attacked law enforcement to break into the Capitol building. So, where was the backup law enforcement? We know they exist—we saw them brutally attack many peaceful protesters this summer during the Black Lives Matter Movement. So where were they during a planned event to attack the Capitol building? They were not already in place because of the skin colour of those participating in them. This was white privilege in its most blatant form. They were not viewed as ‘dangerous’ or ‘threatening’—white privilege. Only about a hundred people were actively arrested, and three hundred others identified who could ‘possibly’ face charges—white privilege. They will not experience being labelled as terrorists—white privilege. They will not lose the life of a loved one for walking down the street—white privilege. Their lives will not change in the same way Brown people did, owing to the systemic racism upon which America is built.

After 9/11, new laws and task forces were created to protect citizens from such attacks happening again. This included creating the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which combats terrorism and other threats domestically, the passing of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which saw significant changes around privacy, and the establishment of the Transportation Security Administration. While these measures were implemented to protect U.S. citizens from acts of terrorism, the laws did not protect Brown people from racist attacks—attacks those who stormed the Capitol, actively

participating in domestic terrorism, will never experience. No drastic measures were taken after the Capitol riots because the Capitol is already one of America's most secure buildings—unless you are a white Trump supporter. One terrorist attack from al Qaeda changed how the world saw Brown skin. Meanwhile, a domestic terrorist attack on the Capitol changed nothing about how white skin is interpreted.

Traditionally, when you think of a successful man in the United States, you think of a white businessman, like Bill Gates or Elon Musk. After 9/11, Brown bodies, especially masculine ones, could never be viewed the same way. They were attached to the ideas of violence and distrust. Growing up, my family was not well-off. My dad worked a lot, while my mom took care of my brother and me. I think there was a time where I only saw my dad every few months because of work. I was scared it would be the last time I saw him every time he would leave the house. While that might sound extreme to people, watching Brown people be targeted for hate crimes was hard, as I am Brown, too. I did not grow up in a religious household, so I never understood the importance of the turban, what it symbolizes, or what it meant to him. So, I decided to ask. He explained to me that “Sikhs are very visible with a turban. Most Sikhs cut their hair to fit in, and others are from rural India, who hold onto their customs and religion. For the most part, Sikhs are recognized as taxi drivers or blue-collar workers in America. I wear my turban because I am a proud Sikh, and it demonstrates that turban-wearing Sikhs can be the idealized image of success in the U.S., even though you look different.” In today's world, to be understood is to be recognized as human. So, I cannot help but wonder that if more (white) people took the time to ask both Sikhs and Muslims what their religion means to them, they could be more accurately understood. But in order for this to happen, white people must first acknowledge the privileged lives they hold in society. Rather than misunderstanding an

entire race based on one incident. Stereotyping is a driving force in perpetuating divisions between social groups. Thus, it is not until we all can see each other as humans that we will be able to come together as a unified community.