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**OPINION // OPEN FORUM**

**The attacks on Asian Americans won't just go away. We must act.**

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Tuesday night's carnage in Atlanta was beyond distressing. It yet again adds to the deluge of recent cases of harm and, sadly, death to Asian Americans.

When I watched the YouTube video of the assault on 84-year-old Vicha Ratanapakdee that resulted in his death, I was shocked and angry. I wished I could brush this off as an anomaly, a purely random and capricious act.

However, it is impossible to do so in the face of these continued tragedies.

It shook me to the core when I learned the attack on Mr. Ratanapakdee occurred on the same street in San Francisco where I grew up. When I was in elementary school on a weekday evening, my father was outside our Anza Vista Avenue home taking out the garbage. A man pointed a pistol at my father demanding his wallet. For my brother and me, it was the first time we had ever experienced the possible loss of a close loved one.

The police would catch the suspect, but my father refused to testify, due to a concern about retribution. It is an action that I can understand as his son and as a father. We know that Asian Americans are often targeted because of their reluctance to engage in the legal system.

President Biden's call Thursday against Asian American violence was a critical step to stem the hate and violence. We must build on that as a country, which includes passing legislation sponsored by Rep. Grace Meng, D-N.Y., to create a position to monitor hate crimes related to COVID-19. The response requires the U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division taking a lead in prosecuting hate crimes. It requires local elected officials and law enforcement to enforce laws and work in a culturally sensitive manner with Asian Americans.

During President Barack Obama's administration, I led the Community Relations Service, a Department of Justice agency with a mandate to respond and prevent hate crimes based on identity, including race. The agency did tremendous work in helping communities cope and heal at Sanford, Fla., after the 2012 killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, and at Oak Creek, Wis., in 2012 after a white supremacist shot six dead at a Sikh gurdwara.

The harsh reality is that while Asian Americans are being scapegoated for the pandemic today, the history of anti-Asian violence stretches to the Gold Rush days. It will not disappear of its own accord. The real tensions between China and the United States when it comes to trade, money valuation and global leadership will continue to unleash collateral damage on Asian Americans unabated — unless our leaders take action.

During much of 2020, President Donald Trump and other leaders labeled COVID-19 the "Chinese virus" and the "kung flu." The data on the increase in anti-Asian sentiment and violence since the pandemic started has been well-documented, including the over 2,800 incidents recorded by Stop AAPI Hate.

The gut punch for me has been listening to relatives, friends and students at the college where I work, recount their ugly anti-Asian verbal incidents.

While my father never attributed his being robbed to racism, it is impossible to not appreciate how central race was to our lives as a whole. When my family first moved to Anza Vista Avenue in 1967, we were one of the first Asian families to reside there. Asian American and other families of color were prevented from living in many white neighborhoods for generations in San Francisco, long considered one of the most liberal and progressive cities in the country.

My parents, perhaps in an effort to protect their children, had my brother and me attend St. Mary's, a Catholic school in Chinatown. However, upon entering an all-boys mostly white Catholic high school, I can readily conjure memories of bullies taunting me and others with random anti-Asian epithets. Ultimately I transferred to Lowell High School, which was more diverse and much less racially hostile.

After sacrificing for their children and saving for years, my parents built a dream home in a different San Francisco neighborhood and moved in 1992. Shortly after moving in, my father opened an anonymous note dropped in the mail slot complaining about the aesthetics of a garden that my father tended to with sweat and pride. "We are in America, not China," it read. I cannot remember my father ever complaining about anti-Asian racism against him on any other occasion, so the anger in his voice stays with me to this day.

The questioning of our place in America has always been used in an attempt to dehumanize us.

I am heartened by the allyship that humanizes all of us. Black and Brown communities working with Asian American communities to stop the preying on the most vulnerable, no matter the race. The Community Relations Service, which had been targeted for elimination by the Trump administration, needs to engage with local communities to provide mediation, cultural competency and hate crimes training. Social service and nonprofit agencies to provide culturally responsive support and prevention must be sufficiently funded. We owe action to those who have paid a high price by working together to protect our beloved communities.

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