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Everything Inc

Freedom in America

By KUMAR VENKAT

As flights partially resumed on Friday, Sept. 14 after the terrible attacks in New York and Washington D.C., I drove a guest to the San Francisco airport. After waiting at the airport all day, he finally got in line to board an aircraft that looked like it would take off.


Then a security agent approached him and informed him that the captain would not accept him on this flight. The reason: Some of the passengers were uncomfortable traveling with this peaceful monk from India.

He was not given a chance to answer any questions or to ask any. It didn't matter that his baggage had been randomly selected for a thorough hand-search during check-in and cleared. He himself had been searched for several minutes with a metal detector at the security point before reaching the gate.

The nature of his transgression was clearly his appearance he was dressed in the traditional orange robe of a Hindu monk. He is also a dark-skinned man with a beard. When I received his confused and disturbed phone call at midnight, it sent chills



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up my spine.

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Just earlier in the day, he had admired the wonderful organization and prosperity of American society, and the country's unified response to the tragedy. After nearly two decades of living and working in this country, and as an American citizen now, I have come to believe that the key to this success lies in a unique kind of freedom that America pioneered.

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There are other democracies and free societies in the world. But freedom in America, while far from perfect, has come closest to the ultimate freedom that the human soul yearns for. Its basic ideals are so powerful that they have attracted a continuous stream of immigrants for over a century.

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Freedom in this country means that it doesn't matter where you come from, or what the circumstances of your birth are. It doesn't matter who you know, or how well connected you are. It doesn't matter what your religious or spiritual beliefs are, or what language you speak at home. It is the freedom to pursue any goal in life that doesn't harm others. It is the freedom to speak your mind without worrying about a violent backlash.

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The energies, talents, and aspirations of each new wave of immigrants have breathed new life into American society time and again. The recently ended economic boom was fueled by Silicon Valley's high technology, which is as much a product of immigrant minds as of those born in America. Countries like India are continuing to supply the skilled workers needed to sustain America's high-tech economy.

In whatever ways we respond to the unspeakable horrors of global terrorism, we cannot afford to taint the ideal of freedom that has long sustained and unified this country. Included in this ideal is respect for the rights of every individual, whether residing here or merely visiting for legitimate reasons. If we lose sight of this ideal, then we are casting doubt on the very future of this society. America as we know it cannot exist without the ideal of freedom as its foundation.

When we look abroad to the causes of the recent violence, we must make a clear distinction between

the few who have no qualms destroying thousands of lives and the hundreds of millions who are just as innocent as the victims of terrorism. The latter have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as much as we Americans do. We cannot destroy their lives and livelihoods, and call it collateral damage, without destroying our own ideals.

In the long run, if we want a peaceful world, we can do no better than to remember these words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: "We cannot achieve peace except through peaceful means."

The monk, my friend and teacher, is finally on his way home. I hope that he will overlook the prejudices of a few and consider visiting us again next year. By then, I hope that America will have worked out a response to this tragedy based on upholding peace and freedom throughout the world.

Kumar Venkat writes on social, economic and environmental issues.

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