

2026 Elie Wiesel Competition

1st Place Junior Essay

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The Cost of Silence and Hate

"We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormenter, never the tormented." This powerful quote by Elie Wiesel reminds us that staying silent in the face of injustice allows harm to continue. As humans, we often rely on a defense mechanism that leads us to blame others in order to protect ourselves from guilt or consequences. We blame others for our own mistakes and for choices that have caused us pain. Sometimes, it feels easier to cope with hurt, anger, or grief when we have someone to direct those emotions toward. This behavior is known as scapegoating. Scapegoating happens in everyday life, whether it's blaming a classmate for a group project gone wrong or getting angry at another driver for a close call on the road. However, scapegoating also appears throughout our history, with devastating consequences. From the Holocaust to modern examples of discrimination, entire groups of people have been unfairly blamed for society's problems. These patterns show how dangerous unchecked hatred and blame can become when people remain silent instead of standing up for what is right.

The planning of the 9/11 attacks took place in Afghanistan, a country where many Muslims live. Many Muslims immigrate to the United States to escape war, poverty, and other hardships in their home countries in search of safety and opportunity. However, after the attacks, many innocent Muslims faced discrimination because they were unfairly associated with the terrorists. As a result, they became victims of hate crimes and prejudice. Many also experienced increased difficulty when traveling, especially in airports. The innocent Muslims were blamed for this tragedy, similarly to the way Jewish people were blamed for Germany's problems. Similar to Muslims, Jewish people were blamed before the Holocaust even happened. They were blamed for the problems that Germany had, and Hitler used biased propaganda, dehumanizing Jewish people, saying that they were the "alien race". The hatred directed at both religions because of scapegoating caused serious harm.

Both America and Germany believed that sending people of a different race to camps would get rid of their fears or fix their problems, even though it would not. After Pearl Harbor, many American citizens of Japanese descent were sent to War Relocation Authority (WRA) camps because of fears about national security and pressure from the public. There was also ongoing racism toward Japanese Americans. About 120,000 Japanese citizens and people of Japanese descent were forced to move to camps along the West Coast, where they lived in horrible conditions with many other families. Even though these were not death camps, 1,862 people still died. Many deaths were caused by sickness, poor living conditions, violence, and the deaths of infants. In a similar way, Hitler sent people to camps, and Roosevelt also approved sending people away. Both leaders believed that removing a group they feared or disliked would solve their problems, but it did not.

Hitler scapegoated Jewish people for Germany's economic and social problems, even though they made up only 1% of the population. In a similar way, immigrants today are often blamed for issues like crime and unemployment. Immigrants make up about 15% of the U.S. population, yet many face unfair treatment and hatred. While it is the law that undocumented immigrants must return to their home countries, legal immigrants and even American citizens still experience discrimination and blame. Because of fear caused by increased ICE raids, many families feel forced to leave the country, and people worry about being separated from loved ones. This shows how fear and scapegoating can lead to harmful actions, just as they did during the Holocaust. While the U.S. government is different from Hitler's regime, blaming groups of people is still scapegoating, no matter how it is justified.

"First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out - because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out - because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out - because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me." - Martin Niemöller. I believe in this quote because I have experienced it myself. When I needed support at certain times in my life, the silence of others hurt more than the words of those who disagreed with me. If we want to prevent another tragedy like the Holocaust, we must stop scapegoating and blaming others. We need to stand up for one another and speak out against injustice - whether you are Muslim, Japanese, Jewish, Christian, or anything else, everyone deserves respect. In the end, all that truly matters is choosing to be kind, brave, and decent human beings.