

## PSR Sacramento 2016 Scholarship Essay Contest Finalist

America: A Fragile Peace

By Elizabeth Helmke

Rio Americano High School, Sacramento, California

Imagine living in a country in which the last two generations of citizens have known nothing but oppression under “emergency rule.” Police detain and torture those opposed to the government, and large public gatherings are not allowed. Add to this a crop failure, a growing socioeconomic gap, and several civilian uprisings. Finally, in the spring of 2011, Syria turned its guns against its own people.

Upon receiving the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, the Dalai Lama said that peace “can only last where human rights are respected, where the people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free.” The ongoing Syrian conflict illustrates that when people’s rights and freedoms are taken away, when citizens starve and are subjected to poverty, peace cannot endure.

In contrast, many Americans perceive our country as relatively peaceful. This is due in part to our Constitution’s guarantee of freedom for all citizens, its emphasis on individual rights, and our historically strong economy. Possibly our most significant freedom is the right to openly express our opinions, whether through speech, writing, or demonstration. These pave the way for our other individual rights because we can petition the government for changes without resorting to violence. Another factor instrumental in promoting peace is our economy. In 2015 we had the world’s largest GDP, which has allowed us to enjoy a high standard of living. Taken together, the individual freedoms afforded to us and our lifestyles have made America a comparatively peaceful nation.

However, recent political and socioeconomic changes have allowed me to see how fragile this peace is. Over the past decade, our widening wealth gap, fear of terrorism, and politically driven war of words over social media has stirred unrest. A skewed distribution of wealth has left people feeling frustrated, particularly the poor, for whom many benefits were cut. Some Americans also feel less safe at home, due to a combination of terrorist threats and decreased trust in the police force. In 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement began over social media as a result of profiling and police brutality towards African Americans.

Due to Americans’ fear of terrorism, animosity has risen against Muslims, even spreading into our national political campaigns. In colleges across the U.S., students humiliate and “silence” each other over sensitive political topics, claiming to be victims of verbal abuse. I often wonder whether I will be subjected to the same limitations on expression when I attend college. If we as a nation are beginning to feel unsafe, unsuccessful, and unheard, then the peace we enjoy now is a luxury we must be careful to maintain. In order to preserve the hallmark of American peace and freedom, our right to free expression, we should first learn to tolerate each other’s different opinions. In this way, we can then work together towards progress and a more stable nation.