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There's more than one side to the story

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Last week was the week the proverbial worm turned. It was the week President Trump finally went too far for all those people for whom he had not previously gone too far.

People resigned from the president's various consultative committees so fast Trump had to scrap them. Internet companies hitherto committed to free expression decided that enough was enough. And numerous Republican politicians stepped forward to denounce the man their party put in the White House.

The line Trump had crossed was rhetorical. He had failed to denounce with sufficient speed, conviction, and clarity the white supremacists and neo-Nazis whose rally in Charlottesville, Va., led to the death of a young woman last weekend. "There is only one side," tweeted former vice president Joe Biden in response.

I yield to no one in my contempt for fascists and racists. The people who marched in Charlottesville chanting "Jews will not replace us" and waving swastika flags are indeed beneath contempt. That some openly carried semi-automatic firearms may explain why the police lost control of the situation.

There is at least prima facie evidence that when James Alex Fields Jr. rammed his car into another vehicle close to a crowd of counter-protesters, he was attempting to cause death and injury with a political motive. His crime can and should be prosecuted as an act of terrorism. Trump's attempt to spread the blame for Heather Heyer's death by suggesting that the counter-protesters were also violent was thus indefensible.

Nevertheless, much as I regret Biden's decision not to run for the presidency — which I still believe he would have won last year — I feel uneasy about "There is only one side" if it is intended to be a general statement about political violence. There is only one side when it comes to Nazism: you have to be against it. But there is more than one side engaged in political violence.

First, the counter-protesters at Charlottesville included representatives of the anti-fascist ("Antifa") movement. In Germany, where the movement traces its roots to the Communist paramilitary groups of the 1920s, Antifa groups have long been under domestic surveillance as "extremist organizations." Several individuals linked to Antifa were charged with assault after the riots outside July's G-20 meeting in Hamburg. Only last month, three Antifa members were arrested for fighting with Trump supporters at a rally in Philadelphia.

Some American Antifa groups prefer to cast themselves as heirs to a domestic historical tradition, such as the radical abolitionists who instigated and aided slave rebellions in the 1850s. But this too implies political violence. Redneck Revolt raises money for its own gun club through the “John Brown Solidarity Fund.” Members brought weapons to Charlottesville.

According to calculations by the Cato Institute, “nationalist and right-wing terrorists” have been responsible for 219 murders on American soil since 1992. Left-wing terrorists are some way behind, having claimed “only” 23 lives. However, three quarters of victims of the far right were killed in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, 22 years ago. More than half the leftist murders have taken place since the beginning of 2016.

But wait. Let’s not allow the fascists and anti-fascists to distract us from the most significant source of political violence over the past two decades: Islamic extremists, who have killed more than 10 times as many people as the far right in the United States since 1992. True, most of those died in 9/11, but the Islamists still lead by any meaningful measure.

According to the latest data, nearly 35,000 people were killed by terrorists around the world last year. The great majority were victims of Islamist groups such as ISIS, including the 49 people killed in an Orlando nightclub last June. Last week was not untypical: one dead in Charlottesville, but at least 15 in Barcelona. There may be only one tactic these days — hit-and-run with cars. There’s more than one side using it.

I do not remember Biden, much less his boss, tweeting “There is only one side” after any Islamist atrocity. On the contrary, president Obama often used his considerable eloquence to make just the opposite point. In his speech following the 2012 Benghazi attacks, he even went so far as to say: “The future must not belong to those who slander the prophet of Islam,” as if there were some moral equivalence between jihadists and those with the courage to speak critically about the relationship between Islam and violence.

Last week one of the chief executives who repudiated Trump, Apple’s Tim Cook, announced a \$1 million donation to the Southern Poverty Law Center. Yet that organization earlier this year branded Ayaan Hirsi Ali (full disclosure: my wife) and our friend Maajid Nawaz “anti-Muslim extremist.” That word “extremist” should be applied only to those who preach or practice political violence, and to all who do: rightists, leftists, and Islamists.

Trump blew it last week, no question. But as the worm turns against him, let us watch very carefully whom it turns to — or what it turns turn into. If Silicon Valley translates “There is only one side” into “Censor anything that the left brands ‘hate speech,’” then the worm will become a snake.