

Are There Really Two Sides When It Comes To Political Violence In The U.S.?

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Three days after the violence in Charlottesville, Donald Trump doubled down on his shocking accusation that when it came to political violence in the United States, there were “two sides.” In fact, he argued that the media simply ignored the “Alt-Left” and left-wing political violence in general.

The notion that there is any moral or empirical equivalency between the political violence of the right and the left in the United States is simply wrong. It is wrong empirically. And just as importantly, it is wrong because when it comes to the use of violence, there is a massive difference in values between the left and the right.

First, consider the facts.

The violence in Charlottesville was precipitated by a crowd led by self-proclaimed Neo-Nazis and members of the Ku Klux Klan – two organizations whose histories are steeped in the most extreme forms of political violence.

Trump’s assertion that it included many “good people” ignores the fact that the crowd was chanting the Nazi slogan “*blood and soil*” and “the Jews will not replace us.” It would not take but a second for any “good people” who joined the crowd to realize they were in the wrong place and leave.

And of course there is the inconvenient fact that a professed Neo-Nazi is charged with using his car to accelerate into a crowd of counter-protesters, murdering a 32-year-old woman and critically injuring many others.

Trump singled out a small group of Antifa, or anti-fascist activists, who arrived at the protest equipped with clubs and dyed liquids which they definitely used to combat the violent right-wing protesters.

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There is no doubt that these fringe groups play right into the hands of right-wing propagandists like *Breitbart News*. But the fact remains that they didn’t kill anyone.

There have been aberrations from the norm of non-violence among progressives in the United States. That includes the “Weathermen” of the 1970’s and the Antifa today.

The vandalism caused by a small band of Antifa dressed in black in downtown Washington the day of Trump's inaugural could have seriously tarnished the image of the growing opposition to the new president and his policies.

In fact, its memory was washed away by the birth of a massive non-violent resistance movement that burst onto the scene in the form of the Women's March the very next day — the largest single multi-city mass mobilization in history of the United States.

A look at the history of political violence in the United States makes it utterly clear there is no equivalency whatsoever between right and left.

A study by the Anti-Defamation League reviewed 372 murders that were committed by domestic extremists between 2007 and 2016. It found that 74 percent of these were committed by right-wing extremists, 24 percent by radical jihadists and only 2 percent by those on the extreme political left. In other words, right wing political extremists killed three times more Americans than *all other* forms of political violence combined.

According to *The New York Times*, a study by the libertarian Cato Institute found that:

White nationalists; militia movements; anti-Muslim attackers; I.R.S. building and abortion clinic bombers; and other right-wing groups were responsible for 12 times as many fatalities and 36 times as many injuries as communists; socialists; animal rights and environmental activists; anti-white- and Black Lives Matter-inspired attackers; and other left-wing groups.

During last year's election campaign, groups affiliated with the Trump Campaign, like right wing provocateur James O'Keefe's Project Veritas, accused the Democratic Party, the Clinton Campaign and me of inciting and provoking violence.

In fact, they were unable to point to *one* instance where events sponsored by, promoted by, or in any way connected with the Democratic Party involved violence or even provoked violence on the other side.

Unless, of course, you consider a man dressed in a duck suit – carrying a “Trump Ducks Releasing his Tax Returns” sign to be violence.

Somehow wearing a duck suit is not comparable to the KKK's hundred and fifty year history of lynching African Americans, or Nazi death camps or killing your political opponents by ramming into a crowd with a speeding car.

It is heart-breaking that as the last of the “Greatest Generation” who fought for years to defeat the horror of Fascism and Nazism in Europe during World War II pass from the scene, a President of the United States could give comfort to organizations and leaders who reify the Nazi Party and KKK.

Former Imperial Wizard of the KKK, David Duke thanked the President for his remarks:

“Thank you President Trump for your honesty & courage to tell the truth about #Charlottesville & condemn the leftist terrorists in BLM/Antifa,” Duke tweeted after the news conference.

White supremacist leader Richard Spencer said Trump “cares about the truth” and said Trump’s “statement was fair and down to earth.”

The far right had, of course, come to Charlottesville to protest the decision by the democratically elected city council to remove a public memorial dedicated to Robert E. Lee.

Memorials matter. Robert E. Lee was not an American hero. He was the military leader of the greatest insurrection ever mounted against the government of the United States. He was a traitor whose actions helped cause the most horrific spasm of domestic violence in our history. And it was all to defend the right of plantation owners to enslave African Americans. This is not a man who should be honored in a public park.

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But just as important as the actual history of political violence in the United States, there is another reason why the notion that there are “two sides” is so outrageous.

The goal of creating a non-violent society has always been central cornerstone of progressive values.

The far right, on the other hand, promotes and honors violence as a natural, noble component of the human history.

In fact, Steve Bannon, Trump’s Chief Strategist and self-proclaimed spokesman for the Alt-Right when he published *Breitbart News*, admits to being heavily influenced by the work of authors Neil Howe and William Strauss and their books *Generations: The History of America’s Future (1991)*, and *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy (1997)*.

The Nation reports that:

According to Strauss and Howe, roughly every 80 years—a saeculum, or the average life-span of a person—America goes through a cataclysmic crisis. Marked by savagery and genocide, and lasting a decade or more, this crisis ends with a reset of the social order and its survivors all vowing never to let such a catastrophe happen again.

The Alt-Right believes that life is fundamentally about the struggle for dominance. And violence is the natural means of achieving dominance. That is the underlying philosophy of Nazism and Fascism. It is the underlying philosophy of white supremacy and the Alt-Right.

As a result, the Nazis perpetrated the most horrific crimes against humanity in the modern era.

One of Trump’s top advisors in his White House is Sebastian Gorka. At the Inaugural Ball, Gorka proudly wore a medal on his jacket that was conferred during the WWII era by the regime of Miklos Horthy. Horthy was the anti-Semitic World War II leader of Gorka’s native Hungary who collaborated with the Nazis and presided over the deaths of 600,000 Hungarian Jews.

The infliction of systematic violence, like the Nazi genocide of World War II springs from values that engage hatred. Progressive values prize empathy, universality and love.

Historically the KKK – and other white supremacists – have not hesitated to use the most gruesome violent means to maintain the oppression of African Americans in the United States. In its heyday, the KKK perpetrated more acts of domestic terrorism than any other group.

I grew up in the South, and began my work in progressive politics as part of the civil rights movement of the 1960's and 70's.

In fact, in the decade after I graduated from Duke University, one of my good college friends was murdered as he protested against the KKK in North Carolina.

One of my colleagues in the civil rights movement in Shreveport, Louisiana where I grew up was a big middle aged white guy who was a reformed KKK activist. He called himself a reformed “hater”.

He was reformed by the moral clarity of Dr. Martin Luther King and the non-violent movement he led.

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In the right-wing view, violence – and war - are inevitable. In general, the right believes that war – and the violent resolution of conflict – has always been part of human society and always will be.

The progressive view is very different. It is progressives who believe in peace not war; who work to end the scourge of gun violence. It is progressives who take seriously our national commitment to the view that all people are created equal and must be treated that way. It is progressives who work to eliminate the sources of violent conflict like poverty and oppression – to create a society where the fruits of our economic progress are widely shared and not hoarded by the few.

In the progressive view, human evolution – and the development of civilized society — is characterized by our increasing ability to resolve differences through non-violent means.

Scientist and historian Jared Diamond's study of human development, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, points out that the first question for a typical member of one band of hunter-gatherers, when he encountered a member of another band, was why he should not kill them on the spot.

The universality of the ethical demand to “love thy neighbor as thyself” is a very recent development in human evolution. It has emerged only over the last several thousand years of our approximately seven million years of evolutionary history. Previously, most behavior involving moral content pertained only to members of our own band, tribe or ethnic group.

The fundamental progressive value is to prioritize the survival and success of human beings – *all human beings*.

The evolution of human society has heavily relied on the creation and protection of methods through which strangers can resolve disputes without violence.

Dispute resolution structures have evolved at increasingly large levels of social interaction over the last 13,000 years. Today, effective and legitimate structures to avoid violent conflict are just forming at the world-wide level.

The danger posed by the use of war or other means of violence such as terrorism to resolve conflicts has greatly increased because of the growth of our technological capability, global communications and interdependence. That is why our survival as a species depends on how quickly and effectively we can create a truly non-violent world-wide society.

Our exploding technological power means that if war and violence are inevitable, as the right believes, then human beings are doomed. Progressives believe that we can – and must—create a non-violent future. This is not a utopian view. It is the only practical way to avoid joining our cousins the Neanderthals as an evolutionary dead end.