

As Trump faces Charlottesville reckoning, Joe Biden shows why America must call out extremists of all shades

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Last week was the week the proverbial worm turned. It was the week Donald Trump finally went too far, for all those for whom he had not previously gone too far. People resigned from the president's various consultative committees so fast that 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, most memorably the former governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

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 led to the death of a young woman.

Trump did belatedly say what needed to be said on Monday. "Racism is evil," he declared, "and those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs, including KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists and other hate groups." However, before and after that statement, he also said that there had been violence "on many sides". On Tuesday morning, Trump insisted there was "blame on both sides" (as well as "very fine people on both sides") and that some "alt-left" groups had been "very, very violent" on the streets of Charlottesville. "They came charging with clubs," he alleged.

"There is only one side," tweeted the former vice-president, Joe Biden, in response.

Watch: 'Alt-left came charging with clubs in their hands'

I yield to no one in my contempt for fascists and racists. I have spent much of my career as a historian trying to fathom why bogus theories of racial difference became so widely and fanatically believed that millions could be murdered in the name of racial "purity". Those who marched in Charlottesville chanting "Jews will not replace us" and waving swastika flags are indeed beneath contempt.

There appears to be some evidence that James Alex Fields Jnr rammed his car into another vehicle near a crowd of counterprotesters, in an attempt to cause death and injury with a political motive. This action can and should be prosecuted as an act of terrorism. Trump's attempt to spread the blame for Heather Heyer's death was indefensible.

If this is the beginning of the end of this presidency – which is how it feels as I write, with the news that chief strategist Steve Bannon has been fired – then Trump has brought it on himself.

Strike one: an endless catalogue of crass statements, of which last week's were only the latest. Strike two: failure to deliver any significant legislative success after seven months, despite majorities in both Houses of Congress. Strike three: alienation of numerous American allies, no significant check (yet) on foes such as North Korea and Iran, and bizarre sycophancy to frenemy No 1, Russian president Vladimir Putin.

Nevertheless, I feel uneasy about Biden's "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. This is not to defend Trump. This is to defend truth.

First, the counterprotesters at Charlottesville included representatives of the anti-fascist ("Antifa") movement. In social media in the days before the "Unite the Right" rally, Antifa groups made no secret of their interest in physical confrontation.

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 organisations". Several individuals linked to Antifa were charged with assault after the riots outside July's G20 meeting in Hamburg. Also 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.

According to the Cato Institute, "nationalist and right-wing terrorists" have been responsible for 219 murders on American soil since 1992, while left-wing terrorists claimed "only" 23 lives. Then again, three-quarters of victims of the far right were killed in the Oklahoma City bombing, 22 years ago. More than half the leftist murders have taken place since the beginning of 2016.

But 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 US since 1992. True, most died in 9/11, but the Islamists still lead by any meaningful measure. Nearly 35,000 people were killed by terrorists around the world last year: the majority were victims of Islamist groups such as Islamic State. Last week was not untypical: one dead in Charlottesville, but at least 13 in Barcelona.

I do not remember Biden, much less his boss, tweeting, "There is only one side" after any Islamist atrocity. On the contrary, Barack Obama often used his considerable eloquence to make just the opposite point. In his speech after 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."

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Last week, one of the chief executives who turned on Trump, Apple's Tim Cook, announced a US\$1 million donation to the Southern Poverty Law Centre. Yet, that is the organisation that earlier this year branded Ayaan Hirsi Ali (full disclosure: my wife) and our friend Maajid Nawaz

“anti-Muslim extremists”. That word “extremist” should be applied only to those who preach or practise 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 into. If Silicon Valley translates “There is only one side” into “Censor anything that the left brands ‘hate speech’,” then the worm will have turned into a snake.