

THE TRIBUNE

Portland victims proof Americans still great

Michael Tanner

June 7, 2017

Rick Best was a 53-year-old Republican who had unsuccessfully run for county commissioner on a conservative platform that stressed his opposition to tax increases and excessive spending. He was a 23-year army veteran who had served tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan. And he was married with three teenage sons and a twelve-year-old daughter.

Taliesin Namkai-Meche was Best's political opposite, a 23-year-old liberal environmentalist. He graduated from Reed College just last year, and was working for Cadmus Group, a consulting firm that stressed the importance of "green energy," among other things. He had just bought his first house.

Micah David-Cole Fletcher, just 21, struggled with autism. He worked at a pizza shop while attending Portland State University. In his free time, he wrote poems, including one on tolerance that had won a local contest.

These three men couldn't have been more different. They didn't know each other, and, under other circumstances, probably would never have met. Yet, last week, all three of them intervened to protect two teenage Muslim girls from a knife-wielding racist who accosted them on Portland's light-rail system. Best and Namkai-Meche were killed by the attacker, while Fletcher was badly wounded.

Anyone looking for American exceptionalism need look no farther than the courage of these three men.

It is easy to focus on the things that divide us right now. And there is no doubt that we are divided. There is a climate of hate, intolerance, and intimidation that infects both sides of the political debate.

On one side, mobs resort to violence to silence speakers with whom they disagree. On the other, the denizens of the alt-right and their fellow travelers spew the worst kind of bigoted filth. In a time of fear, it is far too easy for people to retreat into a primitive tribalism that can be used as an excuse for the most inexcusable behavior.

When a professor is beaten in Vermont for inviting a controversial speaker to campus, or others cheer the assault of a reporter in Montana, it is the climate is ripe for someone such as the Portland attacker.

On social media and in comment sections, the incivility that has come to characterize so much of our political discourse is on full display. Terms such as "traitor" and "fascist" are tossed around

indiscriminately. Entire religions are denigrated. Racial slurs are tolerated or even condoned as a check on political correctness run amok.

These agents of hate are not America. America is the millions of people from across the political spectrum who practice charity, tolerance, and basic decency every day. America is all those who stand up for what is right, even when it is not popular. America is about a Republican, a Democrat, and an autistic poet putting their lives on the line to protect young women from a different faith and culture simply because it is the right thing to do. You want diversity and tolerance? We just saw it.

Yes, this country is imperfect. An honest look at our history shows that we have often treated African Americans, Latinos, women, gays, and other minorities abhorrently.

Yet, no country has peacefully come so far so fast from such an ugly past. It is the character of the American people that has helped transform the political and legal landscape to overcome the old bigotries. Full equality may still be aspirational, but it is part of the American character to have such aspirations.

We hear a lot these days about the need to “make America great again.” But America is already great – and so long as we continue to produce men such as Rick Best, Taliesin Namkai-Meche, and Micah Fletcher, it always will be.

Michael Tanner is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author of “Going for Broke: Deficits, Debt, and the Entitlement Crisis.”