

Taking Sides: Charlottesville, Protests, and Moral Imbecility

by Craig DeMelo

While receiving his Nobel Prize, the late Elie Wiesel—who nearly died at the hands of the nazis—famously said, “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor...”

The incident in Charlottesville and the subsequent fallout have presented what should be the simplest dichotomizing of good and evil, yet our country is again—bafflingly—divided. Unlike other political issues, Charlottesville has an objectively wrong side, and unfortunately a great number of people on the right have happily decided to occupy it.

Let’s recap what happened: a sizable mob of white men and women, many of whom were heavily armed, took to the streets of Charlottesville with Nazi and Confederate flags and torches, shouting racial epithets and supremacist slogans. And, once met by counter-protesters, one of their number drove a car into a crowd, injuring almost twenty and killing a 32-year-old woman.

The blame—all of it—rests squarely on the shoulders of these villainous bigots. When the first response is to point to the counter-protesters, you are “helping the oppressors.” Only in a world of the most rank and obsequious partisanship, could we find people willing to diffuse culpability by making such a staggering false equivalence. But that “whataboutism” is exactly what we witnessed in the ensuing days.

It took President Trump hours to even address the ordeal (for a point of reference, it took him minutes to tweet about Nordstrom’s when they dropped Ivanka’s clothing line). When he

finally made a public statement, he refused to mention white supremacists by name and stated that there is hate and violence “on many sides.” After two days of pressure from just about everyone to denounce the actual hateful organizations, Trump begrudgingly did so in a set of prepared remarks. Then, a day later, he extemporaneously doubled down on his original comments, referred to the “alt-left” (as though such a thing exists), and declared in no uncertain terms that both sides are guilty.

That line was taken greedily by his supporters who wasted no time falling on message boards and social media threads denouncing left wing activists as somehow equal to—or worse than—the Klan. This is morally outrageous. Failing to roundly condemn racist groups is tantamount to tacitly endorsing them. Placing counter-protesters in the same category lets the supremacists off the hook and validates their message. The only moral and rational position available is the one that unambiguously admonishes racists, and at the very least distinguishes them as—forgive the cliché—the absolute worst of all evils. Trump and his ilk have failed this simplest of ethical tests.

In an effort to obfuscate the matter, Charlottesville is also being touted as a free speech issue; it’s not. There are limitations to the first amendment, two of which are exceptions pertaining to “fighting words” and speech designed to incite (I’m not a constitutional lawyer, but something tells me screaming racial slurs while armed and marching with torches and Nazi flags just might constitute inciting. It certainly isn’t a “peaceful demonstration”). If the Richard Spencers and David Dukes of the world want to reserve a hall where some number of white people can congregate to wax aggressive about the perceived shortcomings of everyone with slightly more melanin content, they should be able to do that. I don’t believe that they should be disallowed to voice their abhorrent and despicable views. But let’s not imagine for a

moment that that is what was happening in Charlottesville. They were shouting their hatred (and their insecurities) from the proverbial rooftops and begging for confrontation.

And that's what they got.

The counter-protesters who showed up to oppose these neanderthals comprised members of several different activists groups—the two most notable being Black Lives Matter and the Anti-Fascist movement known as Antifa. These are the groups that are being derided on the right as “just as bad” as the KKK and Nazis.

When weighing the rightness or wrongness of such a group, we only need to ask a few questions. Then their placement on the spectrum of moral culpability should be transparent.

First, what are the goals of these organizations? Speaking generally, white supremacists, neo-nazis, and the KKK want to achieve or maintain superiority for white Christians; they want to preserve “White Culture” by either the marginalization, segregation, or eradication of non-white people (particularly, but not limited to: Blacks, Jews, Hispanics, Muslims).

What do groups like Antifa and Black Lives Matter want? Antifa is a militant group that opposes racism, sexism, economic inequality, and any form of bigotry. Black Lives Matter is a group that seeks to stop systemic racism and violence against minorities, especially by police officers.

Secondly, what would an ideal world look like for these groups? White Supremacists would love to see a world without minorities, or at the very least an America without them. BLM and Antifa would want a world without racism and any form of discrimination or unjust economic disparity.

How can any sane individual view these groups as similar?

Now, of course this is not to say that BLM and Antifa are without flaws. Antifa's methods are typically destructive and unyielding. BLM has occasionally promoted some questionable protest methods (blocking highways for example). The protests on college campuses are a shameful impingement on actual free speech. And some members affiliated with BLM have chanted repugnant things about police officers. But regardless of how uncompromising or misguided their methods can be at times, the bedrock motivation of these groups is one of racial and economic equality. And the mere fact that people of every race are in these organizations alone places them in a different moral sphere than white supremacists.

Finally, what is the worst that you get from these left wing groups? Intransigent views, destruction of property, retaliatory violence, anger, hatred directed at perceived injustice, and the inadvertent stifling of free expression. There is little doubt that these groups—often unorganized and lacking effective leadership—have room for improvement. But their hearts, bleeding though they may be, are in the right place.

What is the worst we've gotten from White Supremacists? Murder, genocide, lynching, subjugation, slavery, assault and battery, injustice, inequality, segregation, hatred, discrimination...the list goes on. And all based on the meaningless distinctions of skin color, religion, or ethnicity. Nobody should want to see that ugliness reemerge in the world.

Lastly, what seems to have gone unnoticed by Trump and his minions is that one side of this battle exists solely as a response to everything for which the other stands. If there wasn't systemic racism or racial injustice or other forms of discrimination—the lifeblood of white supremacy—there would be no Antifa. There would be no Black Lives Matter.

There simply is no equivocating here. One group, flawed though

they may be, is fighting to end hatred. The other is hatred. One side seeks equality, the other racial supremacy. To call these equal is to achieve a breathtaking level of moral blindness.

Elie Wiesel was right: we must choose sides. If you, or Donald Trump for that matter, can't tell the difference or think they're the same, then you've already planted your flag. And it's on the wrong side.

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