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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Why the Nazis Came to Charlottesville

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Charlottesville, Va. — “Should we go downtown?” my wife asked over breakfast on Thursday. “Remember, after the election, when we said we would stand with our neighbors when they were threatened? Are we being true to our commitments?”

For weeks, we had read reports from white supremacist groups that they were coming here by the hundreds or thousands to start a fight. They promised to come armed. The racist Daily Stormer website has been calling 2017 the “Summer of Hate,” and Charlottesville would be ground zero.

How should we respond? All summer, we and the other residents of this college town have been discussing our choices across tables, on Facebook, on local radio shows, in church groups and at community meetings.

We could join many of our neighbors for teach-ins at the university, discussing racial history, prospects for diversity and paths toward justice. The University of Virginia had arranged a slate of public programs to give people a safe place to convene, commune and debate while armed, angry white supremacists invaded our downtown, just a mile and a half from the university.

Or we could join thousands of our neighbors who had pledged to confront the Nazis, risking broken bones, pepper-sprayed eyes, arrest or worse. We had friends and neighbors on both sides of this choice. And we saw virtue in both actions.

One school of thought says we should deny these extremists attention, as if attention were the oxygen that feeds their flaming torches. The other calls for direct confrontation: Show them they are unwelcome, outnumbered, and that the community is bravely united in disgust.

Denying hate groups attention might work if everyone agreed to do so. But as long as television cameras — or even just regular people streaming on Facebook Live and posting to YouTube — were going to witness the events, and as long as others were committed to confronting the white supremacists, there would be oxygen.

Plus, as we had learned from previous such assaults on our community, the hate groups were not just after attention. They wanted conflict. They came to hear the sound of flesh being struck, bones being broken. So the idea of denying them attention seemed less significant as the event drew closer. Still, there were compelling reasons to avoid confrontation.

“They will have guns,” I said to my wife. “That’s the defining issue for me.” She agreed. The fact that we have a child who is committed to social justice and curious about politics tipped the balance. For her sake, we could not risk putting ourselves in danger, especially when we had an opportunity to enrich her experience with peaceful community engagement.

I now believe we made the wrong choice. Does my status as a parent make me special? It shouldn't. A young man named Dre Harris was ambushed in a parking lot and took dozens of blows by club-wielding thugs. He took them so I wouldn't have to. Next time I will stand on the street with my neighbors, even at the risk of injury or death. It's the least I can do to repay those who stood bravely this time.

We knew it would be violent. These racists are not a joke. They are not weak or small in number. They are not just pining for attention. This was not a media stunt. They did not come to offer "speech." They did not come to engage in "debate." They came here to hurt us.

And they did. Two Virginia State Police officers died in a helicopter crash. A car allegedly driven by a white supremacist crushed to death a paralegal who had committed herself to justice, 32-year-old Heather Heyer. Hospitals treated more than 20 more people for injuries, some life-threatening.

They hurt us. But they did not defeat us. Local clergy locked arms to stare down the attackers. Volunteers dispensed water to counter-demonstrators. Black Lives Matter members put their bodies on the line for all of us. Medics treated the pepper-sprayed eyes of racists and anti-racists alike. Just as the hatred came from one side only, the care did not come from "many sides." It came only from the people of Charlottesville.

These invaders hate my family. They threaten my country. They are numerous. They are emboldened. They are organized. They have friends in the White House. They are armed. They came in July. They came in August. And now they promise to return to Charlottesville to hurt more of us.

Charlottesville is an ideal stage for them to perform acts of terrorism. This was the home of Thomas Jefferson, the man who codified religious tolerance in colonial Virginia and who declared "all men are created equal." It's also the home of Thomas Jefferson, the man who owned, sold, raped and had whipped people he considered racially inferior to him. It's the site of the University of Virginia, an institution steeped in conservative traditions that echo the Old South. And it's the site of the University of Virginia, an elite, global research university with a cosmopolitan faculty and student body.

And, for reasons that speak to the perverse legacy of the Confederacy, we have here a statue of a man who spent no significant time in Charlottesville and betrayed the United States by waging a bloody war to destroy it and preserve slavery: Robert E. Lee.

Two years ago, this city engaged in a civil conversation about how we would like our public monuments to represent our city. Last year, the City Council, after significant debate and dissent, voted to move two Confederate statues from two small neighborhood parks in the center of town to McIntire Park, a large, grassy park on the north side of the city. There, the monuments could remind us of our hateful, shameful past, but they would not represent our present or future.

We in Charlottesville demand the right to express our community values, not be bound by those of the "Lost Cause" of the Confederacy. We demand that the rest of this country recognize how serious the threat of racial violence is. We never had illusions. It's in our air and water. It's our local history.

This is not about “free speech.” It never was. There is no “free speech” if anyone brandishes firearms to intimidate those they despise. You can’t argue with the armed. The Nazis told us their intentions clearly on Saturday. This, to them, is about “blood and soil.” They are serious. So are we.

This week, it was Charlottesville. Next week, it could be any other town. We all must make a decision. How would you confront this threat?

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