“When the Looting Starts, the Shooting Starts”—A Rhetorical Trope Fuels Racism

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June 10, 2020

For over a week protests continue to take place in the streets of Minneapolis and other cities across the nation—including New York, Washington, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Atlanta and Chicago. Many of these protests also led to violence and looting. As a communication scholar, I believe these episodes, what triggered them and the variety of responses they evoked are rhetorically significant for many reasons and demand close inspection.

First, the dramatic nature of these protests titillated the media, often shifting coverage away from the real story, the increasing racism in the United States and how the lives of African Americans are threatened every day. Even the COVID-19 pandemic, which is not yet under control and may be a related story, was put on the backburner. Despite the fact that most of those in the streets were protesting peacefully, the media opted to focus almost exclusively on violence and photos of those breaking the law—especially Blacks.
Second, as upsetting as violence is, our response to it must be reasoned and thoughtful rather than quick and superficial. For example, we can understand without condoning the pain, anger and frustration explaining why people rioted. As Martin Luther King reminded us: “A riot is the language of the unheard.” We now also can understand that Black Lives Matter is not an attack against white Americans; it is an awareness of the institutional racism and unequal system of justice unacceptable and injurious to all. And surely we can appreciate and be more tolerant of football players who took—and will take—a knee as an appropriate and peaceful rhetorical gesture protesting the nation’s racism.

Moreover, we must pay close attention to who specifically is engaging in violence, especially since many reports suggest that most come from outside the area, are not part of the protest and may include anarchists, pro-Russia forces, white supremacists and extreme leftist groups—all trying to exacerbate and inflame the problem for a variety of political reasons that may have nothing to do with the death of George Floyd.

Third, President Donald Trump’s rhetorical response must be scrutinized. Per usual, he endeavored to capitalize politically on the situation and stoke hatred by employing a historically racist trope, hoping his tweets would fuel rhetorical appeals for reelection—his overriding concern. Not surprisingly, Twitter flagged the President’s tweet, warning that it glorified violence: "Any difficulty and we will assume control, but when the looting starts, the shooting starts" and “Either the very weak Radical Left Mayor, Jacob Frey, get his act together and bring the City under control, or I will send in the National Guard & get the job done right.....”

Trump’s incendiary discourse escalated when later he sneered at the protesters and threatened to sick “the most vicious dogs, and most
ominous weapons” on them if they get out of hand. He also chose to build a fence around the White House, use pepper gas and deploy federal forces (some without any identification) to push back protesters so he could stage a photo op. What a dangerous message for the President to send at a time when Americans need calming rhetoric and have genuine worries about brutality and racism.

My hope has been that those in the streets, as well as concerned American citizens and the media would not be duped into taking the President’s rhetorical bait. After all, that simply empowers Trump’s discourse, enabling him to succeed in deflecting and diverting. Instead, we must keep our eye on the death of George Floyd, the racism that caused these riots and the current COVID 19 pandemic threatening our nation.

Doing otherwise is counterproductive to the goal of reducing the systemic racism infecting our society and terrorizing African Americans. The challenge, as many Black leaders note, is to channel outrage and anger in ways leading to justice rather than becoming an excuse to avoid solving the problem. Moreover, taking Trump’s bait also might produce a political outcome in November that most Americans don’t want.

Fourth, as a scholar of communication, I contend that this tragedy should cause us to be more cognizant of and sensitive to how language matters—how the words of the President and other public officials, though not always obvious to some, have serious consequences. Whether by design or effect, one’s language can evoke images, memories and historical experiences that understandably create anger and outrage. Until we fully grasp and take that to heart, racism will persist. Let us not forget the contributory role played by rhetoric in perpetuating systemic and institutional racism.
Finally, what is transpiring in Minneapolis should remind all Americans that we have a moral and patriotic duty to speak out loudly not only against racism but the President’s rhetorical habit of emboldening and empowering it. While I am a white man of privilege, I also am a Jew who is concerned about the rise of anti-Semitism. As I have written in many recent op-eds, an attack against Blacks is an attack against all—including Hispanics, Muslims, Jews, LGTBQ and other groups who have been oppressed and experienced discrimination. For that reason we all must protest in whatever way possible. Looking the other way is an act of tolerance and approval—and hence no longer acceptable.

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