GOP can no longer ignore tie from Trump talk to hate crimes

Last week, 59 gravesites were vandalized with anti-Semitic symbols and language at a Jewish cemetery in Fall River, Massachusetts. Sadly, this is only the most recent example of the kinds of intolerable acts that have been committed over and over the past few years by those full of hate and bigotry. Why do they keep happening? It is imperative that we keep asking: Is President Donald Trump at least partially accountable for this anti-Semitic and racist behavior?

It’s a question I posed in a column last August, published in the Houston Chronicle — a column that went viral when it was shared by Dan Rather, a well-known, highly revered journalist whose career began in Texas. Some claim that Trump’s quasi-racist discourse and penchant for stoking fear and division are unrelated to the behavior we saw in Fall River. Or the behavior we saw in Christchurch. Or Charlottesville.

Or even in Houston, when vandals scrawled swastikas and President Trump’s name on a statue and a section of the Berlin Wall at Rice University.

But such an argument — that President Trump isn’t at least partially accountable — ignores the well-documented capacity of public rhetoric to empower and embolden despicable people to come out of the shadows; to make it safe for them to act on their once-hidden prejudice and anger.

For more than 40 years, I’ve studied and taught courses in rhetoric and communication at the University of Texas at Austin. The focus of much of my research has been on the persuasive influence of political discourse; this work documents the ability of language, whether by design or effect, to inflame emotions and either directly or indirectly trigger and incite behaviors that often go against our established norms.

Let me be clear: There have always been anti-Semites and racists in the U.S. There always will be. This is related to the inherent nature of the human condition. So it would be silly to assert that President Trump somehow created these attitudes or caused these acts.

But we must acknowledge that racist acts of hate have increased dramatically during his time as a candidate and during his administration. As a recent study reported by the Washington Post documented, “counties that hosted a 2016 Trump rally saw a 226 percent increase in hate crimes.”

This simply cannot be dismissed as purely a random matter of chance.

Don’t get me wrong. I am not saying that the president himself is an anti-Semitic or racist. That misses the point. Even if he is, continually saying so is not only counterproductive, but it obscures the more legitimate worry that Trump’s rhetoric is likely to empower anti-Semitic and racist people — those who normally are afraid to act on their hatred — to commit bad deeds.

As I wrote in 2018, we have a moral obligation to expose this connective tissue between Trump’s rhetoric and violent acts.

Republicans, most of whom are good and decent people, must do what they haven’t: speak out forcefully against Trump’s racist-leaning discourse. They must stop normalizing, protecting and enabling the president just because they fear political repercussions.

Cowardice is no excuse for allowing unethical behavior; declining to reprimand Trump is tantamount to agreeing with him, if not giving him permission.

And whether or not we believe the president is the cause of the problem, we can surely at least admit that he could be part of the solution.

How? By forcefully denouncing white supremacists, making clear he refuses to receive support from them and declaring that white nationalism — not our nation’s Southern border — is the real national emergency.

But he probably won’t. Trump surely knows that taking these steps would potentially erode his base and thereby lessen the likelihood of his re-election in 2020.

As a result, I fear, he will continue at minimum to exploit racism and anti-Semitism for political purposes — and I worry that the Republicans in Congress will not have the courage to do what they know is morally right: stop him.

Editor’s Note: This column was originally published this week in the Houston Chronicle and is reprinted here with the author’s permission.

Richard Cherwitz is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor in the Moody College of Communication and founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium at the University of Texas at Austin.

---

Copyright (c)2019 Greenville Herald-Banner, Edition 03/30/2019
March 30, 2019 6:45 am (GMT +5:00)

Powered by TECNAVIA