The Inherent Link between President Trump’s Rhetoric and Violent Acts

By Richard Cherwitz

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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 asked as recently as August 2018. Some claim that his racist discourse and constant appeals to fear and division are unrelated to
the behavior we saw in Fall River. Or the behavior we saw in Christchurch. Or Charlottesville. Or even here 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 this position — that President Trump isn’t at least partially accountable — fails to be aware of the capacity of rhetoric to empower and embolden despicable people to come out of the shadows — to make it safe for them to act on their 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 behavior — behavior that often goes 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 tied 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 they have increased dramatically during his time as a candidate and during his administration. As a recent study 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-Semite 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 has the power to encourage 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 discourse. They must stop normalizing, protecting and enabling the president just because they fear political repercussions. Cowardice is no excuse for allowing unethical behavior; not reprimanding Trump is tantamount to agreeing with him, if not giving him permission.

And whether we believe the president is the cause of the problem, we can 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 the border — is a national emergency.

But he probably won’t. Trump surely knows that taking these steps potentially would erode his base — and lessen the likelihood of his reelection 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 act on what they know is morally right by stopping him.

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