For several consecutive nights violence raged in the streets of Minneapolis and other cities across the nation—including New York, Washington, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Atlanta and Chicago. These episodes, what triggered them and the responses are rhetorically significant for many reasons.

First, the dramatic nature of this event titillated the media, 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, was put on the backburner. Despite the fact that most were protesting peacefully, the media opted to focus almost exclusively on the violence and photos of Blacks breaking the law.

Second, as upsetting as violence is, our response to it must be reasoned and thoughtful. 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.”
Moreover, we must pay close attention to who is engaging in violence, especially since early reports suggest that most come from outside the area 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.

Third, President Donald Trump’s rhetorical response must be scrutinized. Once again he endeavored to capitalize 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 on Saturday when 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. What a dangerous message for the President to send at a time when Americans want calming rhetoric and when the nation has real concerns about brutality and racism.

I hope those in the streets, as well as concerned American citizens and the media will not be duped into taking the President’s rhetorical bait. After all, that would allow Trump’s discourse 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.

To do otherwise is counterproductive to the goal of reducing the systemic and structural 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 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 being complicit—and hence no longer acceptable.

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