Hold Trump Accountable for His Words

By Richard Cherwitz, For the Express-News

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President Donald Trump, who whips up crowds with rhetoric about the “dishonest” media and urges chants of “Lock her up!” needs to look in the mirror when he accuses others of contributing to the toxic. Photo: Marie D. De Jesús /Staff Photographer

For the past year, I have written numerous op-eds and letters denouncing the president for his hateful, bullying and racist discourse. My arguments are not primarily partisan. As a scholar and teacher of rhetoric, I have argued that Donald Trump’s words have real consequences for which all Americans must be concerned.
On Tuesday we saw additional evidence for this claim. Suspicious packages were sent to former President Barack Obama, the Clintons, former CIA Director John Brennan (via CNN), former Attorney General Eric Holder, Rep. Maxine Waters and billionaire George Soros. All these individuals are political figures critical of Trump, and all have been viciously attacked by the president and his followers in speeches and tweets. Coincidence or pattern?

I do not believe that Trump “directly” caused or perpetrated these violent attacks. I also believe the White House was sincere when it immediately condemned what transpired. Nevertheless, we must admit that when a nation’s leader preaches hatred, demonizing people and groups, and making ad hominem arguments, this substantially increases the likelihood that such rhetoric will breed more hatred, empowering and enabling others to engage in despicable behavior.

When the president applauds an elected official for body-slamming a reporter, calls the press “the enemy of the people” and incites those at his rallies to chant “lock her up,” the content and tone of his rhetoric surely has the potential to produce unsavory consequences.

In addition, how Trump responded Tuesday and Wednesday morning was uncharacteristic of the head of a civilized democracy. On the same day suspicious packages were sent to high-ranking political figures, the leader of our country didn’t have the decency and courtesy to reach out to those respected public servants who were attacked. Worse, Trump spoke at a rally and failed to assume even a modicum of responsibility for the bellicose rhetoric that breeds such despicable deeds.

Trump blamed Tuesday’s actions on the media for its “fake news” and political bias, as well as Democrats for their hyperbolic rhetoric. Why didn’t he say we all must assume accountability and responsibility for the out-of-control state of our political discourse?

We can no longer assume this is about Republican versus Democrats or conservatives versus liberals. It’s about right and wrong, about ethical and moral principles.

It is time for President Trump to be held accountable. He has put himself on the ballot this November — and we have the power to speak loudly, restoring checks and balances and the rule of law. American citizens must look in the mirror and ask: Should I vote for any candidate or incumbent who fails to rebuke — or has a record of failing to rebuke — the president?

Tuesday’s events also provide a wonderful opportunity to move beyond partisanship, offering the nation a path to healing. Imagine how rhetorically powerful it would be if the president, along with Republican and Democratic leaders in Congress, issued a joint statement sharing responsibility for the current political climate and calling on all of us to refrain from inflammatory and uncivil discourse.
I shall remain hopeful that decency will prevail.

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