Stop Making Hatred a Political Issue—A Rhetorical Perspective

By Richard Cherwitz, Dec. 6, 2018

A dome from the Victoria Islamic Center’s burned mosque lies on grass on Jan. 31, 2017. Photo by Jim Malewitz
As a Jew and proud American I am horrified and deeply offended by the increasing number of almost daily stories about the rise of anti-Semitism and racism both at home and abroad. Last week’s attack on a Columbia University Holocaust professor is the anti-Semitic incident de jour. Closer to home, Renee LaFair of the Austin Anti-Defamation League reports an almost 90 percent jump in anti-Semitic incidents in one year. And authorities are suspicious that the recent burning of a synagogue in Houston may be arson.

Unfortunately, too often we get embroiled in unproductive debates about whether President Donald Trump is racist and is the direct cause of hatred and violent activity. These political debates — in which I confess to being a participant — miss the point and obscure a legitimate worry.

Focusing primarily on whether Trump is the culprit is counterproductive and likely will impair our nation’s ability to meet the challenge of addressing the problem. After all, if the goal is to reduce hatred and anti-Semitism, why would we want this important issue to get mired in another harangue between those who support Trump and those who don’t? Doesn’t that guarantee inefficacy?

As a scholar of communication and argumentation, I have studied numerous instances documenting the rhetorical significance of how debates are structured. Valid arguments often are rendered impotent because of how they are framed — and that may be the case today given the manner in which discussions about hatred and anti-Semitism almost are inseparably wedded to critiques of the president.

I am especially troubled by the context in which all of this is happening. First, political polarization and enmity toward others, which may be at an all-time high and level of intensity, appears to feed on, take advantage of, and exacerbate such hatred.

Second, we live at a point in history when the “Browning of America” (the realization that America’s minorities are quickly becoming its majority) is regarded as threatening to some who will soon and for the first time be in the minority. Many of these people even blame their own problems on increasing numbers of the nonwhite population.

Third, and even more worrisome, is that younger Americans — like those I teach, as well as younger citizens of the world — do not have the memories or knowledge of the Holocaust that their parents and grandparents had. According to a new survey by CNN, one of every three European respondents said they know little to nothing about the Holocaust, and one of every 20 said they have never heard about it.

Several of my students told me last semester that, while they “believe” the Holocaust took place, they feel ill-equipped and unprepared to respond to those who suggest otherwise. Sadly, there are fewer individuals capable of making cogent arguments supported by more than opinion to rebut Holocaust deniers.
Fourth, and as has been repeated repeatedly over the last two years, too many people no longer have an understanding or appreciation of “facts” and “truth.” The demarcation between opinion and knowledge is blurred.

All of these factors make anti-Semitism, racism and hatred more possible and tolerable.

The only antidote is awareness and resistance. The media has a professional obligation to expose this problem; CNN’s special report is a good start.

Republicans must bracket their partisan views and speak out forcefully against all racist discourse (not just the president’s), making clear it won’t be tolerated. Similarly, Democrats must resist the urge to reduce this issue to a condemnation of the president.

Teachers like me not only must do a better job of educating students about the history of the Holocaust, we must make sure the next generation understands the epistemological difference between “knowledge” and “opinion.” They must have the wherewithal to argue effectively, always employing critical thinking skills.

The rest of us, many of whom don’t follow or engage in politics, must avoid the complacency that existed in pre-Nazi Germany — a complacency that arguably allowed the rise of Adolf Hitler. We must stop saying this can’t or won’t happen in the United States. Obviously, it can and is. It is imperative that we have the courage to protest often and loudly, making clear that “never again” is more than a slogan.

Put simply, rather than remaining preoccupied with whether President Trump is to blame for the problem, let’s move beyond partisanship and emphasize that hatred — and finding ways to ameliorate it — should not be about politics.

Years from now, all of us will be asked: What did you say or do to prevent this?

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