

# Complacency will aid in the rise of anti-Semitism and racial bias

By Richard Cherwitz, For the Express-News

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*Toppled gravestones at Chesed Shel Emeth Cemetery, in University City, a suburb of St. Louis, Mo., Feb. 21, 2017. Nearly 200 grave markers were vandalized in the 124-year-old Jewish cemetery, leaving people wondering if might be another in a spat of anti-Semitic episodes that have occurred around the U.S.*

As a Jew and proud American I am horrified and deeply offended by the increasing number of stories about the rise of anti-Semitism and racism both at home and abroad. Too often we get embroiled in unproductive debates about whether President Donald Trump is anti-Semitic and racist.

Moreover, to suggest that he is directly the cause of this hatred and violent activity misses the point and obscures a legitimate worry.

What is clear is that the president's rhetoric and actions have at minimum emboldened and empowered those such as the neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacists. The best examples of this are Trump's repeated unwillingness explicitly to condemn and disassociate from racist behaviors since he came down the escalator and announced his candidacy for president, as well as his suggestion that there were good people on both sides of the Charlottesville protest — all of which was taken as a wink and a nod to extremist groups.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that following his election these groups have come out of the shadows and are now a daily part of current events. The same is true in Europe as well, where the growing influence of nationalist leaders seems to be correlated with an increase in hateful discourse and behavior.

What especially troubles me is the context in which all of this is happening. First, political polarization, which may be at an all-time high and level of intensity, appears to feed on, as well as take advantage of and exacerbate, such hatred.

Second, we live at a point in history when the "Browning of America" is regarded as threatening to some who for the first time will become the minority. Many of these people even blame their own problems on increasing numbers of the nonwhite population.

Third, and even more worrisome, is the fact that younger Americans, who as a professor I teach, as well as younger citizens of the world, do not have a memory or knowledge of the Holocaust that their parents and grandparents had.

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 over and over in the last two years, too many people no longer have an understanding or appreciation of "facts" and truth." All of these — and many additional factors — make anti-Semitism, racism and hatred more possible and tolerable.

The only antidote to this is awareness and resistance. The media has a professional obligation to expose this problem. Republicans, most of whom are good and decent people, must do what they haven't, namely, speak out forcefully against the president's racist discourse, telling him there will be no more business as usual. Put simply they must stop normalizing, protecting and enabling Trump simply because they fear political repercussions. Cowardice is no excuse for permitting unethical behavior; not reprimanding Trump is tantamount to agreeing with him.

As teachers not only must we do a better job of educating students about the history of the Holocaust, but we must make sure the next generation understands the clear demarcation between “facts” and “opinion” and that statements like “the truth is not the truth” are unacceptable. They must have the wherewithal to argue effectively, always employing critical thinking skills.

And 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. Like many Germans then, we must stop saying this can’t or won’t happen in the United States. It is imperative that we have the courage to protest often and loudly, making clear “never again.”

Put simply, rather than merely debating whether president Trump is the cause of the problem or whether he himself is a racist and anti-Semitic, let’s move beyond partisanship, calling him out and vigorously resisting. While it may be trite to say, years from now all of us will be asked: What did you say or do to prevent this?

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