

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45: On Charlottesville, racism, and President Trump's comments

August 16, 2017

Contributors:

Host:

ADRIANNA PITA

CAMILLE BUSETTE

Director – Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion Initiative

Senior Fellow – Economic Studies, Governance Studies, Metropolitan Policy Program

(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump Administration.

BUSETTE: I'm Camille Busette. I'm the director of Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion at the Brookings Institution.

Over the weekend, a car plowed into a crowd following a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville. One woman died.

Even the most jaded politician knows that there can't be daylight between his or her views and the condemnation of neo-Nazis in the U.S. In 20 short minutes yesterday President Trump defied that wisdom and condoned the violent behavior of neo-Nazis and white supremacists in Charlottesville over the weekend.

What's wrong with this? Well, several things.

First, the fact that there was even a white supremacist rally speaks to the way racism has festered in this country from the time the first slaves were transported here from Africa to now. As a nation we have coddled people who still identify with the Confederacy. This is a moral failure. Why do we still pay homage to Confederate heroes? When one side loses a war, its history and its heroes are swept away. Its history replaced by that of the victors. Today, Germany doesn't still celebrate the Nazis, and the People's Republic of China does not still honor the Kuomintang. So why have we allowed ourselves as a nation to continue along with the Robert E. Lee statue on the corner?

What happened in Charlottesville forced us to confront this ugly history. Charlottesville helped reacquaint us with the fact that racism is a deep sore in this country, so deeply embedded in the American way of life that we would not recognize our country if its institutions had not been shaped by

the many practices, conventions, and laws that have evolved to restrain and contain the ambitions of African Americans.

When Kenneth Frazier, CEO of Merck, stepped off the president's manufacturing council a few days ago in response to the president's initial remarks, he did so as a rebuke not only to the president but as a rebuke to over 152 years of letting Confederate statues stand, letting white supremacists commit egregious acts of terror, and letting police who beat and shoot black boys and men without provocation off the hook, and letting ourselves as a nation look the other way in the face of these humiliations, atrocities, and insults.

Second, President Trump demonstrated an alarming complacency with home-grown terror and then doubled down on that by tweeting harsh criticism of Mr. Frazier's exit from the council. That a president of the United States would engage in crass political opportunism and not condemn the violence when others across the political spectrum did so implies at the highest levels the reaction to violent racism is a bargaining chip.

There is something deeply wrong with this.

This will be a defining moment for this administration. And here's why. The fight for civil rights in this country has a long history and a diverse set of constituencies, and has come to define American democracy. No savvy national-level politician is going to deliberately ally him- or herself with a president who has angrily tried to sweep away the hard won victories of abolitionists, suffragettes, our troops in World War II, civil rights leaders, farm worker advocates, and LGBTQ champions. A bipartisan list of political leaders has already denounced his recent remarks and a growing list of CEOs have left his advisory council.

President Trump's initial instinct also showed the president to be completely out of touch with contemporary mores. Here is a man who has attacked his own party leaders, who is increasingly

isolated, who has very little to show for six plus months in office, and his reaction to this event is to tell everyone to “love each other” and at the same time give the proverbial finger to one of the most respected CEOs in the country.

In the 21st century no president should support racists acts of terror nor should she or he treat racist acts of violence as a political chit to be called in at the next election.

The president has allied himself with bigots and racists. Morally this is reprehensible and politically this is unsound, as the voting math doesn’t favor blowing wind into the sails of neo-Nazis. The GOP now has a free pass to redefine who it is and to redefine its legislative agenda at the federal level if leaders will cautiously exploit this, but exploit it they will.

Finally, it should be obvious that race relations haven’t necessarily gotten better since the election of Barack Obama in 2008. When the Pew Research Center surveyed Americans in 2016 about racism and discrimination, a majority of whites thought that race relations had improved; blacks and Latinos did not agree. But what is changing is that in an increasing non-white America and in an America of increasing racial mixtures, there is greater sensitivity to social mores around extremist racial violence.

So today, we are starting to ask ourselves, why didn’t the president condemn this act of violence in the strongest possible terms, and why did he double down yesterday on siding with racists and bigots? Why are there statues to Confederate heroes still gracing our public spaces and what are we going to do about that? And Americans of all political stripes see the plowing down of innocent, engaged bystanders by a white supremacist sympathizer as wholly un-American.

Progress, though uneven, is welcome.

(MUSIC)

PITA: If you've been listening to 5 on 45 and like what you're hearing, please take a minute to rate it on iTunes and don't forget to follow us and the rest of the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts.