



Charlottesville and the Road Ahead

On August 12, 2017, a collection of white-supremacists and neo-nazis—organized under the collective banner of the so-called “alt-right”—descended on the city of Charlottesville, North Carolina for a “Unite the Right” rally. They sought to actively oppose the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee, the commanding general of the Confederate Army. Marchers spewed racist and anti-semitic chants. They displayed swastikas, Confederate flags, and other symbols of hate. Some carried semi-automatic assault rifles and handguns. Others carried shields, clubs, and other weapons while covered in body armor and helmets. The evening before the rally, white nationalists marched through the campus of the University of Virginia carrying tiki torches and spouting racist and anti-semitic vitriol.

The “Unite the Right” rally ended before it began. The Governor of Virginia declared a state of emergency as violence—perpetrated by racists and white supremacists—erupted. DeAndre Harris, a black Charlottesville resident, was viciously beaten by a mob of white supremacists. Heather Heyer, a white counter-protestor from Charlottesville, was killed when a white supremacist from Ohio drove his car into a crowd of people protesting the purveyors of hate and bigotry. Nineteen others were injured. The President, speaking a day later, gave comfort to those aligned with racists, falsely equating violent white nationalists with those standing against them. He praised those marching to “Unite the Right” as “good people.”

The sight of white supremacists, neo-nazis, and a gaggle of racists marching down the streets of an American city in 2017, engaging in acts of violence and terrorism, is incredibly disturbing. It is a searing reminder of the deep reservoir of hatred, bigotry, and ignorance that resides in America. And yet, it is also eerily familiar.

It is familiar because it evokes sentiments that have always been part and parcel of our national discourse. Racism is embedded in America’s DNA. It is inextricably linked to the country’s roots. Racism, expressed through an ideology of white supremacy and driven by a narrative of race-based difference, has shaped every facet of American life. That ideology of white supremacy was used to justify a host of unjustifiable race-based, brutal acts in America. It has fueled everything from the genocide of Native people and the enslavement of Black Africans to the marginalization of Latinx people and other communities of color.

It has infected our institutions, producing inequality and perpetuating injustice. From courtrooms, to the halls of government—straight up to the White House—the ideology of white supremacy is all too common a presence. To be clear, the efforts by this Administration to suppress the vote and purge voter rolls, feed mass incarceration, close America's borders, attack affirmative action, and gut healthcare are of a piece with the venom we witnessed in Charlottesville. The President and his followers have heartily embraced white supremacy or given it safe haven. His perpetuation of a false equivalence between bigots and those standing in solidarity against hate was just the latest manifestation of that embrace.

And yet none of that should extinguish hope. What happened in Charlottesville, like what happened in Ferguson, and Baltimore, and so many other cities and towns across the country is America coming to terms with its past and grappling with how that past has shaped its present. America cannot hope to overcome its past until we confront it. At the heart of our mission at the Center on Race, Inequality, and the Law is to tell the unflinching truth about that past and to dismantle the systems and institutions infected racism and inequality. We will continue to advance that mission—by working on behalf of marginalized communities, reforming the criminal justice system, challenging harsh immigration policies, advocating for healthy communities, and fighting the agenda of those who subscribe to an ideology of white supremacy and racism. We hope that you will join us in struggle and solidarity.