

# United States: Charlottesville is a call to action against fascism

Monday 14 August 2017, by [Anonymous](#), [CAPRON Richard](#), [HAIDER Shuja](#), [McLEEMEE Scott](#), [NOLDE Katherine](#), [RUDER Eric](#) (Date first published: 14 August 2017).

**Katherine Nolde, Richard Capron and Scott McLemee round up on-the-spot reports from the deadly confrontation between the far right and anti-racists in a Virginia city.**

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THE FAR-right demonstration in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12—probably the largest public gathering of the racist “alt-right” ever—was clear evidence of the murderous forces nurtured and emboldened by Donald Trump over the past two years.

And it had deadly consequences: One anti-fascist protester was killed and more than two dozen injured when a neo-Nazi terrorist drove his car at high speed into a counterdemonstration led by left organizations, including the International Socialist Organization (ISO), Democratic Socialists of America and Industrial Workers of the World, among others.

Trump issued a weasel-worded condemnation of “hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides” that fooled no one—especially not the far right. “He refused to even mention anything to do with us,” [1] one racist website gloated. “When reporters were screaming at him about White Nationalism he just walked out of the room.”

So the fascists see Trump as one of their own—and for good reason.

But the hate on display in Charlottesville—and promoted by the hatemonger-in-chief—is galvanizing people across the country.

News of the racist car attack was met by a wave of solidarity—within hours, there were vigils and protests in dozens of cities, followed by many more the next day, and plans for still more in the days to come. By the end of the weekend, people had taken a stand in solidarity with Charlottesville in hundreds of towns and cities [2].

These people who sent a message of defiance were not only repulsed by the hatred of the fascists and horrified by their violence, but they understand the need to confront this menace before it can inflict more suffering and take more lives.

Charlottesville showed the grave threat we face in the form of an emboldened far right. But it is also revealing the potential to mobilize a mass opposition to the hatemongers, whether they strut in the streets or in the Oval Office.

**THE THOUSANDS mobilizing** against the Trump agenda in recent months are making it

impossible for the far right to claim it represents more than a small part of the U.S. population.

When the Klan came to Charlottesville last month to protest the removal of a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee from a city park, they attracted around 50 supporters—and were outnumbered 20 times over by antiracists [3].

Humiliated by this, far-right groups announced another rally for August. The city granted a permit for this past Saturday in Emancipation Park to “Unite the Right” organizers—a last-minute legal attempt to deny the permit was stayed by a judge based on an appeal by the ACLU. Permits were also granted to counterdemonstrators to assemble a couple blocks away in Justice Park.

The far right came looking for a fight in Charlottesville, and they got started Friday night with a torchlight parade on the University of Virginia campus [4]. Chanting “Heil Trump” and “You will not replace us”—sometimes changed to “Jews will not replace us”—some used their lighted torches to threaten the small numbers of antiracist protesters who confronted them on campus.

If the racists thought they would have the same overwhelming force on their side the next day, they were wrong. The fascists were outnumbered by their opponents, ranging from Antifa contingents and the radical left to more moderate antiracist organizations. But the antifascists’ advantage wasn’t as large as it could have been.

Groups from each side made pass-by marches within sight of one another Saturday morning, and there were isolated clashes, leading to an atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty.

When a group of ISO members approached the southwest entrance to Justice Park, the counterdemonstration site, they found a handful of young white men with automatic rifles and red bandanas tied around their necks standing watch. Momentary fear dissipated when the socialists were welcomed with cheers and handshakes—these were members of Redneck Revolt, a newly formed militant Southern self-defense group.

Local and state police were present, but they maintained a hands-off policy when the right-wingers made threatening moves against the counterprotesters. As a report from ProPublica recounted [5]:

*“[A]t one of countless such confrontations, an angry mob of white supremacists formed a battle line across from a group of counterprotesters, many of them older and gray-haired, who had gathered near a church parking lot. On command from their leader, the young men charged and pummeled their ideological foes with abandon. One woman was hurled to the pavement, and the blood from her bruised head was instantly visible.”*

Standing nearby, an assortment of Virginia State Police troopers and Charlottesville police wearing protective gear watched silently from behind an array of metal barricades—and did nothing.

**WHEN VIRGINIA Gov. Terry McAuliffe** declared a state of emergency at 11 a.m., the National Guard made its appearance. Police dispersed the far right from its spot in Emancipation Park—but this led to roaming groups of racists looking for a fight in the surrounding streets.

Counterdemonstrators heard that the fascists were headed to a part of town with a concentration of public housing to harass low-income residents.

A march was organized spontaneously in defense of the community. “Feelings of uncertainty and defenselessness changed immediately to confidence and authority,” said one ISO member who was part of the action. “We wouldn’t let the fascists control the day.”

Some 300 antifascist protesters marched and chanted in tight formation, coming to a halt just before turning the corner on the street where the projects were located. But on arriving, they found no right-wingers. An organizer from the community went to the front of the march and got on the bullhorn, urging a withdrawal to decrease the chances of bringing police into the neighborhood.

The group made its way back downtown to find another contingent of counterdemonstrators flooding the street in an exhilarated mood. The groups merged and headed uphill toward Justice Park, planning to celebrate their seeming victory in sending the right-wingers packing.

They were about halfway up the hill when all at once came what sounded like a crash or explosion. Bodies flew into the air, and people were screaming. A car had driven into the crowd at full speed, then reversed up the hill and out of sight.

**IN THE chaos**, people did their best to maintain composure, take stock of the situation and call for medics assigned to the march. They moved the wounded out of the street—out of harm's way, in the event of another automobile assault—and called for ambulances.

What arrived instead was a police tank. A man in military dress emerged from the top of the hatch with a rifle designed to shoot tear gas canisters. Three police cars filled in behind him, along with a squad of cops in riot gear. Police finally shut down the area, and the demonstrators dispersed.

Police later reported arresting and charging an Ohio man, James Fields Jr., with second-degree murder, three counts of malicious wounding, and failure to stop at the scene of a crash that resulted in a death. Photographs from earlier that day show the killer brandishing a shield with the emblem of the neo-Nazi American Vanguard group [6].

Fields' car attack killed 32-year-old Heather Heyer, a native of Charlottesville who worked as a paralegal and was passionately devoted to social justice.

A neighbor said "she lived her life like her path—and it was for justice." Heather's mother Susan Bro teared up as she told a writer from HuffPost: "Somehow I almost feel that this is what she was born to be, is a focal point for change [7].

More than two dozen other people were seriously injured. Bill Burke, a member of the ISO from Athens, Ohio, was among those taken away from the scene in an ambulance, given concern that he might have suffered spinal injuries. He didn't, but he was treated for a concussion and monitored for brain damage, along with lacerations to his face that required many stitches and staples, and severe abrasions on his arms and legs.

Burke was released from the hospital late Sunday afternoon and is expected to make a full recovery. He sent this message via fellow ISO members:

*"I appreciate the support and solidarity from everyone. I hope that what the fascists did is a wake-up call for our side. Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism: The right-wingers represent all the worst parts of this capitalist system. If we really want to stop them, we have to be better organized and fight in solidarity against all oppression. Ultimately, we need to fight for a new world that is run for people, not for profit."*

**THAT THE vehicular assault** was no accident seems obvious to everyone but the likes of Donald Trump.

But anyone who doubts it should consider the alt-right meme that appeared months before the Charlottesville showdown [8]. It shows the words "ALL LIVES SPLATTER" above a car plowing into

three people—and beneath it: “Nobody cares about your protest. Keep your ass out of the road.”

It follows Trump’s spirit of “fun” terrorism—with his “joking” offers to pay the legal bills if his supporters beat up protesters and “tongue-in-cheek” references to assassinating an opposing candidate. Such rhetoric has emboldened reactionaries like the torch-carriers reenacting the Nuremburg rally on Friday night in Charlottesville.

Their sickening violence has already led to an eruption of antiracist protest around the country. But we can’t stop there. We need a sustained movement that mobilizes to confront the far right with much greater numbers whenever they try to raise their heads—and that organizes a radical left alternative to the fascists’ politics of despair and scapegoating.

As one participant in the Charlottesville antifascist protests wrote on social media:

*"In order to command the streets, we have to fill them. If we had had people covering every inch of downtown Charlottesville, we wouldn't have been so vulnerable."*

In order to demobilize the fascist movement, they have to be physically outnumbered and driven out...Isolate them, demoralize them.

The heartbreaking thing is that the counter-protesters in Cville had just begun to feel a sense of confidence and unity in action [before the car attack]....Two contingents, two crowds marching happened to converge downtown and were heading to Justice Park to celebrate, finally having achieved a sense of organization after being divided between multiple locations.

This is the goal of the far right: to terrorize, intimidate and destroy the organizations of workers and the left, and anyone else they deem a threat.

We cannot let them become more emboldened because of what happened today."

**Katherine Nolde, Richard Capron and Scott McLemee**

*Alan Maass contributed to this article.*

\* <https://socialistworker.org/2017/08/14/charlottesville-is-a-call-to-action>

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## **We Can Make the Nazis Back Down**

**How a Montana town came together to shut down a white-supremacist march led by Richard Spencer.**

Emboldened by the election of Donald Trump, neo-Nazis with connections to alt-right leader Richard Spencer announced they would hold an armed march in Whitefish, Montana, on Martin Luther King Day. Calling their march a “James Earl Ray extravaganza,” Andrew Anglin used his Daily Stormer website to urge neo-Nazis to spread their blunt message of antisemitism and racism. Antiracist activists in Whitefish and surrounding communities debated how best to respond and eventually mobilized enough public support that Anglin and the Daily Stormer announced they would “postpone” the event.

An activist from Missoula, Montana, spoke with Eric Ruder about how the activist response was organized and the larger significance of this victory.

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### **Eric Ruder**

I'm sure you consider it a big victory that the neo-Nazis canceled their plans for an armed march on Martin Luther King Day in Whitefish. Can you talk about what led up to this moment?

### **Anonymous**

It absolutely is a huge victory. I think it's a victory not only for the people of Whitefish, who have been dealing with this for years — and more sharply in the last couple of months, but also a victory for anybody who is beginning to mobilize against all of the hard-right elements emboldened by the incoming Trump administration.

And it even has international implications. I say that because the catalyst for the march, Richard Spencer, has tried to position himself as a leader of a new white nationalist movement, sometimes called the "alt-right." Spencer lives part time in Whitefish, and his family still lives there. He's setting up headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia, where he is hoping to create an "alt-right hub," and he has just bought the domain name "altright.com." He aims to seize that language and to start unifying both the US and European extreme right.

I think he's in a position to do that. He has a kind of sickening charisma and is media savvy, and I think the media is playing to him in a way that is disgusting. So in some respects, what's happened in Whitefish is a model of how we need to respond — calling the Nazis out for exactly who they are and drawing the links between the so-called alt-right and the actual Nazi movement. In many respects, they're pretty much one and the same.

So I think our ability to shut down the Daily Stormer march was huge. I think they were using this moment to test how far they could take their brand of rabid, unalloyed Nazi propaganda. They also seem to be intentionally wading into the boundary between "free speech" and actual terrorist activity, as they targeted specific individuals who then received graphic death threats. Given that the Trump administration is legitimizing and using all sorts of scapegoating and racism to explain peoples' suffering, a Nazi victory would have confirmed this whole perspective and emboldened the far right even further.

While I cannot confirm this, I think the ACLU decided not to get involved because they recognize that there's a big difference between holding unpopular ideas, which we create space for, and calls to action that are used to incite deliberate and threatening behavior. The Daily Stormer very much engaged in a call to action, and the fact that they were forced to back down is huge.

### **Eric Ruder**

Can you talk more about what happened on the ground after you and the rest of the community learned of this planned march? How did this victory come about?

### **Anonymous**

First, the community of Whitefish, Montana, has been dealing with this menace over the course of years. As a result, there were already organizations that had grown in response to such openly racist ideas. Before the Daily Stormer called for the march, these antiracists were mostly responding to

Internet trolling. The city of Whitefish condemned antisemitic ideas, and one of the local organizations led an anti-hate poster campaign and held very widely attended forums and rallies. The whole community had already been mobilized and had even issued proclamations against Spencer.

Because everybody in Whitefish was familiar with Richard Spencer, they all had an appreciation for how toxic these people are. So there was a fairly vibrant and broad anti-hate group already on the ground in Whitefish. It is precisely this vibrant community that helped compel all of Montana's federal elected officials to come out against antisemitism and against the march, specifically.

But there was also a problem. In the past, they were somewhat isolated in taking on the fight against these guys. So when the Daily Stormer dramatically escalated its tactics by calling for an armed march and announced that they planned to mobilize a large number of racist skinheads from California, they were a bit unprepared for the massive amount of energy that new folks wanted to bring from other areas of Montana. Because of the rise in hate crimes after the election, people from all over wanted to address this markedly more dangerous level of hate.

The human rights groups on the ground in Whitefish are consistent and tireless organizers. Without them, this organizing effort would not have worked. They are the backbone of all of this. But developments all around us were posing the following question: When does it no longer make sense to attempt to "ignore" the power these Nazis are trying to generate? At what point must our own opposition become highly visible? In the face of such dramatically escalated hatred, what tactics do we offer besides countering hate with love?

At the same time that local Whitefish organizers were still aiming to "deprive the Nazis the attention they seek," other groups from Missoula and around the country felt it necessary to go beyond keeping the response indoors. So we had a lot of conversations of this sort. This discussion included a new post-election organization that emphasized nonviolence, and activists and antifascist groups from around the United States that formed since Trump's election. These antifascist groups were more direct-action oriented, and though they were relatively inexperienced, they were sharper in their anger and decisive about the need for direct action.

When the antifascist group announced that they were going to come and confront this march, it was like dropping a bomb into carefully thought through, but overly timid plans. At that point, the Whitefish organizers were planning to hold a party in a school building — away from the Daily Stormer march. The whole orientation was about drawing attention away from the march and "ignoring" them. So they discussed shutting down the streets, shutting down all the businesses, going behind closed doors, going inside the school.

On the other hand, the nonviolent activists from Missoula were troubled by an "inside-only" protest — but did not want to alienate the Whitefish community. While this group was far more immediately respectful of the stated wishes of the Whitefish community, they did not easily grasp that the implications of this Nazi march were bigger than Whitefish. This nonviolent group was therefore initially quite open to dividing protesters on the basis of their insider (Montanan) and outsider status.

In my view, there were problems with all three approaches: fly-in direct action, going indoors, and insider/outsider differentiations. Because I was already knee-deep in organizing for the January 21 Women's March On Montana (in solidarity with the women's march in Washington, DC), I had some degree of legitimacy in taking part in and pushing some pretty intense discussions with a wide range of activists — from the anarchists who planned to arm themselves and march against the Nazis to the mainstream anti-hate organizations based in Montana to various progressives who had been

learning lessons from the protests at Standing Rock. I suddenly found myself right in the middle of all these debates.

I was largely motivated by three different and pretty awful scenarios. First, I felt that the issue had grown larger than Whitefish and we couldn't stop protesters from showing up even if we wanted to. But more than that, I felt it was wrong to "go indoors." I felt it was wrong to cede the streets to the Nazis. I thought it would be absolutely devastating to have images flashed across social media and newspapers of unopposed and armed Nazis marching in Whitefish.

Secondly, as much as I personally had qualms about the fly-in direct action strategy of the anarchists, I understood and sympathized with their strong arguments for direct action. But more than that, I thought the language of "outsiders" versus "insiders" could lead to dangerous scapegoating and would fuel destructive media reports about how protesters can't even get along as they fight the Nazis. The attention would invariably get focused on our divisions and not unequivocally on the deeply horrifying Nazi march.

Thirdly, Montana is an open-carry state. Consequently, when antifascist forces started talking about armed direct action, it created a real sense of panic. As I repeatedly explained to them in long-distance midnight calls, these antifascists had not laid any groundwork in introducing, much less explaining themselves or their tactics. I could easily envision a confrontation between armed Nazis on one side and armed non-local anarchists on the other. Obviously, that would have been an unbelievable disaster in every respect.

I thought any three of these scenarios would have been profoundly demoralizing and would have represented a significant setback for both the Whitefish community and for all of us trying to build a strong resistance to all that Trump enables and represents.

Driven by a desire to avoid these three scenarios and push back the Nazis, I focused nearly all of my contributions on four essential points. First, I urged the antifascists to ratchet down their rhetoric and take time to know the landscape. Second, I argued that we can't and shouldn't try to stop the massive influx of counter-protesters; third, that even as we won't agree on tactics, we must recognize that we are all on the same side against the Nazis; and fourth, that in response to any press attention, we would keep the entire focus on the Nazis and project unity in purpose, if not in tactics.

I think my contributions made a difference. It is also crucial to note that people were open. That says a lot about the political period. People are learning all kinds of political lessons so quickly. There is an interesting level of non-defensiveness right now — at least where I am — where people are receptive to a whole host of different ideas and a whole host of new and different strategies. They are not hardened, precisely because a lot of them are new activists.

The conversations were exciting, really, even if they were sometimes difficult and intense debates. They always felt fruitful and that these were not the same-old arguments with the same-old people holding fast to their same-old positions. It was not that way at all.

Ultimately, where things landed, before the Daily Stormer called things off, was that the "behind closed doors" folks came to value and appreciate the nonviolent protesters who sought to rally outside at the base of the Nazi march. The nonviolent protesters, in turn, carved out spaces where they would coordinate on the ground with the folks more engaged in direct action. So while not everyone agreed to participate in or endorse direct action, we were able to create enough of a framework that we saw each other as all on the same side.

It may not have been a coalition in name, but it essentially acted as one: unity in purpose, diversity in tactics. By the end of the discussions, no one questioned the need for a public show of opposition and no one was using the language of outsider/insider. To me, those two shifts were extremely important.

I can't help but think that the Daily Stormer, who watched us as much as we watched them, became aware that there was going to be this broad array of forces, not only including the more traditional groupings of human rights organizers, hippies, and anti-fascists, but also quite new forces: progressive military veterans and water protectors. You can imagine what that would have looked like — in the town of Whitefish, Montana!

So we were able to mount what started to look like a pretty overwhelming opposition. Of course, there's a combination of reasons that they backed down. Certainly, I think they realized that they overreached and that they couldn't pull it off. Furthermore, at the height of ski season tourism, the town had exactly zero interest in making things easy for the Nazis to march.

And finally, all of the years of hard work from human rights organizers and all of the clear statements about a large, unified public protest that emerged more recently — all of that convinced the city to deploy every legalistic argument it could find. And this, coming from a city official who praised Andrew Anglin's sense of humor in naming the march "the James Earl Ray extravaganza."

I do think the final straw was the Daily Stormer's own incompetence, or perhaps self-sabotage. They submitted a permit request that was ridiculously incompetent. It gave the city a very easy, legalistic mechanism to deprive them of the right to march. And one can't help wondering if that was a deliberate move by the Daily Stormer because it gave them a way out.

So they backed down. And while they continue more targeted and hideous trolling, at least we have drawn a line in the sand. For now. We have stopped this most visible show of force that could have mobilized and terrorized a huge number of people.

Questions do remain about what the far-right forces in and around Whitefish and the rest of Montana are up to. For example, the relationship between Richard Spencer and the Daily Stormer feels a bit like good cop/bad cop or cat and mouse. I think before Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-Montana) was nominated by Trump to be in his administration, Spencer hoped to ride this wave as much as he could until our opposition made it inconvenient.

But now that Zinke's seat may be open, Spencer is trying to legitimize his current of the white nationalist movement. He is thinking about running for Zinke's seat in the US House of Representatives, and he's seeking national attention. So while I think he was initially quite happy to have things all stirred up, I think he is also quite fine with things mellowing out a bit.

Although this can't be confirmed, my suspicion is that Richard Spencer initially brought in the Daily Stormer. I have every reason to assume that he did, otherwise Anglin would not have had key names and information. I also think that Spencer put his mother up to this at some level, and that his mom allowed herself to be publicized in far-right corners as the "innocent victim" of mean and heavy-handed Jewish real estate agents who wanted Spencer out. When things became uncomfortable for them in the media, he came up with a fallback narrative. Spencer claimed he merely wanted an apology for his mother. In some grotesque, manipulative spin, Spencer positioned himself as a loyal son defending his innocent mother. Claiming not to want the march, he stated that "mothers should not be blamed for the sins of their sons."

In an interesting cat-and-mouse performance, Anglin refused Spencer's call to back off the march.



He asserted that it was not Spencer's call to make and that the Nazis needed to prove their strength. I think this may be reflective of tensions within the alt-right about how to move forward in this next political period. I think Spencer is looking to insert himself into the political dialogue in a legitimized way, and I think Anglin is looking to use direct action and violence to build his brand. And I think they need each other, I think they're absolutely dependent on each other, but they position themselves in interesting ways.

Eric Ruder

So having scored this victory, what will it mean for fighting racism and Trumpism generally in the coming weeks and months?

Anonymous

The residue of this victory has big implications locally and beyond. I think every person involved feels this to be a tremendous victory. I go back to the day after the election, when people were in despair and shock. I'm a psychotherapist, and in my practice, people could be diagnosed quite literally with acute distress disorder after the election. You go from that kind of panic and fear and potential passivity to a feeling of being emboldened, that we won. I don't think the consequences of that can be overstated.

I think it's huge to imagine starting the Trump administration on the feeling of a victory. It sets us up for a very different next four years. And victory begets confidence, and confidence begets more mobilization. And statewide, I think it has an effect even on those people who weren't directly involved. For the people that were involved, it has hardened them. It has made possible new spaces for real debate, and that is something that has been lacking for a long time in the virtual world of social-media organizing where people don't actually confront each other and have real discussion.

People have been won over to the idea that we actually need to talk about tactics, that we need to be in the same room, or at least on the same call if we're spread out across the state, in order to debate. People are less afraid of that debate and more able to come back the next day and say, "We're still on the same side, what do we do next?" Again, the lessons of that cannot be overstated.

So this was significant both as a specific victory and as part of the more general process of building the Left. And I think that as we go into the Women's March on Montana, we're looking at having potentially three thousand people there. It may not sound huge, but this isn't like Los Angeles where you can snap your fingers and have a block party of three thousand people. These are people coming from all over the state, who are willing to travel eight hours in 20-degree weather to commit themselves to marching for three hours and to hear an amazing array of speakers. And coming again off of the victory over the Nazis, this march is feeling tremendously celebratory, and we have the feeling that momentum is on our side.

If we had lost, I think that the women's march would have had a kind of demoralized, beleaguered feeling, as opposed to "we are on a roll, and we are going to reclaim what it means to be in state like ours." Some of us are thinking about a plan to travel around Western Montana to give talks about the history of multiracial organizing in Butte, to provide a completely different narrative about immigration and the history of Montana, including the history of organizing by Joe Hill and the Industrial Workers of the World. We need to project a different idea about what Montana is, who lives here, how and why we can unite to fight the far right.

The victory in Whitefish helps set us up to do that in a way that gives us confidence and makes people more open to it as well.

Transcription by Andrea Hektor.

\* Jacobin. 01.23.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/01/alt-right-whitefish-montana-antifascist-richard-spencer-protest>

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## One Has to Take Sides

**“Many sides” aren’t promoting racism and hatred. One side is. And ours is committed to stopping them.**

Yesterday, the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia brought together white supremacist groups from all over the country to demonstrate their volume, in both senses of the word. They cut ridiculous figures at first, dressed in khakis and polo shirts, wielding citronella candles, and shouting awkwardly. Their presence was met by a robust opposition, comprising local chapters of Black Lives Matter, Democratic Socialists of America, Industrial Workers of the World, and other groups. But the rally took a violent turn. A young white nationalist named James Alex Fields, Jr., drove his silver Dodge Challenger into a crowd of counter-protesters, leaving many injured and at least one dead.

Soon after, President Trump made a statement from his private golf course in New Jersey. “We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides,” he said, before adding, again, “on many sides.”

The term “many sides” drew rightful scrutiny from many observers. In a confrontation between racists and anti-racists, in which a racist’s actions resulted in the death and injuries of anti-racists, it’s a strange geometry that identifies multiple equivalent sides. President Trump’s reticence betrays a reactionary bias, which comes as no surprise. But his rhetoric was not unique to him — the mainstream media and liberal intelligentsia had set the precedent.

The morning before the rally, Mieke Eoyang, vice president of the National Security Program at centrist think tank Third Way, tweeted, “If the Bernie Bros wanted to make a show of force on behalf of progressive values, Saturday in Charlottesville would be a good time.”

Neera Tanden, president of liberal think tank Center for American Progress, turned disdainfully to her left later that day. “We have actual fascists marching with torches. Maybe everyone on the progressive side could focus on the enemies of progress in front of us,” she tweeted. [9] “We’re ready for you to join us Neera,” one young activist responded. Tanden’s response was to ask him to condemn “those on the alt left who want to join with the fascists.”

By evening, Sheryl Gay Stolberg, a journalist for the *New York Times* who was reporting from Charlottesville, had tweeted, “The hard left seemed as hate-filled as alt-right.” [10]

This middle-of-the-road tongue-clucking appeared earlier this year, in a *Vanity Fair* article by James Wolcott, pointing a finger at the so-called “alt-left.” [11] Wolcott, too, directed his condemnation at many sides. He characterized the growing radical and socialist left, formerly scorned with the more lighthearted epithet “Bernie Bro,” as something more sinister. There is a “kinship,” he claimed, between the far left and the white supremacist alt-right. They are united by “disillusionment with Obama’s presidency, loathing of Hillary Clinton, disgust with ‘identity politics,’ and a craving for a

climactic reckoning that will clear the stage for a bold tomorrow.”

The torch has been carried by centrist liberals ever since. Just a week before the Unite the Right rally, the *Atlantic* published an article by Peter Beinart decrying the “Rise of the Violent Left.” [12] Beinart focused on “antifa,” which refers to tactical groupings of leftist activists dedicated to defending themselves and their comrades from fascist violence. “The people preventing Republicans from safely assembling on the streets of Portland may consider themselves fierce opponents of the authoritarianism growing on the American right,” wrote Beinart. “In truth, however, they are its unlikeliest allies.”

The day before the rally, the *Wall Street Journal* [13] published an excerpt from an upcoming book by Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, which suggested that leftist anti-racism creates a “centrifugal” force, causing a movement to spiral out and splinter into factions. Even if we grant him his convoluted metaphor, based on a concept considered nonexistent by modern physics, it leads him to dangerous conclusions.

“Black Lives Matter is a textbook example of how not to build solidarity,” Lilla writes. “I am not a black male motorist and will never know what it is like to be one. If I am going to be affected by his experience, I need some way to identify with him, and citizenship is the only thing I know that we share.”

This isn’t just a failure of imagination, though it is certainly that. It’s a moral failure and a strategic failure as well. It offers no meaningful distinction from the politics of Donald Trump, who, after the violence in Charlottesville, tweeted [14]: “We must remember this truth: No matter our color, creed, religion or political party, we are ALL AMERICANS FIRST.”

The first reported death from Charlottesville was of Heather Heyer, a thirty-two-year-old paralegal, who appears from her Facebook page to have been a Bernie Sanders supporter. “If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention,” says her last public post. The cheapness of deriding “Bernie Bros” or comparing the left to the alt-right becomes all the more offensive in light of her courage, and the tragedy that followed. Looking at circumstances like these and seeing “many sides,” indistinguishable from each other, is a stance that history has never revealed to be anything but moral cowardice.

This stance is the subject of Graham Greene’s novel, *The Quiet American*, which follows Thomas Fowler, a journalist in 1950s colonial Vietnam who is dedicated to remaining objective in any situation. He befriends an undercover CIA agent named Alden Pyle, who advocates for a kind of centrist politics he calls a “Third Force” — one that opposes both communism and colonialism, viewing them as equal threats. When Fowler finds out that Pyle was involved in an act of terrorism in Saigon, detonating a car bomb and killing innocent civilians, he goes to speak to a member of the Communist Party who he knows as Mr. Heng.

“Sooner or later... one has to take sides — if one is to remain human,” Heng tells him.

The liberal center has to heed the same warning. In order to reject Trump’s equivocations about “many sides,” we have to take one. There is a side that asserts our common humanity and fights fascism, racism, and hate. It was represented in Charlottesville by the leftist groups who took to the streets to confront the far right. The other side is the one that took innocent lives on those same streets. The stakes are high. We have to choose.

**SHUJA HAIDER**

\* Jacobin. 08.13.2017:

## Footnotes

- [1] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/charlottesville-statement-president-white-supremacists-fbi-civil-rights-investigation-a7891221.html>
- [2] <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2017/08/13/while-trump-equivocates-charlottesville-nationwide-rallies-denounce-white-supremacy>
- [3] <https://socialistworker.org/2017/07/18/the-right-runs-into-a-fight-in-charlottesville>
- [4] [http://www.philly.com/philly/news/nation\\_world/charlottesville-nazi-white-supremacist-march-west-virginia.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/nation_world/charlottesville-nazi-white-supremacist-march-west-virginia.html)
- [5] <http://www.golocalprov.com/news/police-stood-by-as-mayhem-mounted-in-charlottesville>
- [6] <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/charlottesville-suspect-held-hate-group-shield-attack-article-1.3407245>
- [7] [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/mother-of-charlottesville-victim-heather-heyer-im-proud-of-what-she-did\\_us\\_59907c45e4b09071f69a796c](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/mother-of-charlottesville-victim-heather-heyer-im-proud-of-what-she-did_us_59907c45e4b09071f69a796c)
- [8] <https://twitter.com/CarlBeijer/status/896441238689337344/photo/1>
- [9] <https://twitter.com/neeratanden/status/896350667895427073>
- [10] <https://twitter.com/SherylNYT/status/896575560650035200>
- [11] <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/03/why-the-alt-left-is-a-problem>
- [12] <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/the-rise-of-the-violent-left/534192/>
- [13] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-liberal-crackup-1502456857>
- [14] <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/896481262776360960>