

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ***The President as Moral Leader of the Nation***

We are living in a complicated, rather frightening age. Columnist David Brooks calls it “an age of anxiety.” Changing demographic and technological disruption have produced a society where “people live with bewildering freedom, without institutions to trust, unattached to compelling religions and sources of meaning, uncertain about their own lives.” For many this anxiety is producing a fear of the future and many will do anything to escape this fear, which is generating an “age of fanaticism.” This combination of anxiety and fanaticism is occurring at a time when the United States seems hopelessly divided. As Ross Douthat has observed,

- Our divisions are partisan: The political parties are more ideologically polarized than at any point in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and party loyalty increasingly shapes not just votes but social identity, friendship, where you live and “whom you hope your children will marry.”
- Our divisions are religious: The decline of institutional Christianity means that we have no religious center; “apart from Oprah and Joel Osteen, the metaphysical gap between the secularity will of liberalism and religious traditionalists is far wider than the intra-Christian divisions of the past, and on the fringes you can see hints of a fully post-Christian and post-liberal right and left.”
- Our divisions are racial and ethnic and class-based and generational, “conspicuously in the Trump era.” And they are geographic: The metropolis versus the hinterland, the coasts against the middle.

It is into this unique moment in American history that Charlottesville, Virginia occurred over a weekend in mid-August 2017. A group of alt-right organizations (e.g., neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan), characterized by an ideology of white nationalism and anti-Semitism and led by David Duke (Holocaust denier and Ku Klux Klan leader), Richard Spencer and Brad Griffin, organized a “Unite the Right” series of demonstrations in Charlottesville. Counter-demonstrations were led by several groups, including “Antifa” an anti-fascist group opposed to the alt-right.

What characterized these demonstrations? The various alt-right groups hosted a torchlight march obviously mimicking, as they gave the Nazi salute, the Nazis in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Munich and other German cities. These groups were chanting “blood and soil,” (in German, “Blut und Boden”) a phrase foundational to Nazi ideology. “Blood” referred to the goal of a “racially pure” Aryan people. “Soil” invoked a vision of territorial expansion and was used to justify land seizures in Eastern Europe and the forced expulsion of local populations in favor of ethnic Germans. The term was a rallying cry during the 1920s and early ’30s, when the

Nazis and other far-right political parties opposed the fledgling Weimar German democracy. During their torchlight march, they also chanted clear, demonstrable anti-Semitic slogans that any decent person would consider patently offensive. In addition, they marched with swastikas, taken directly from Nazi Germany and Holocaust-era fascist parties. It is in this context that neo-Nazi James Alex Fields, Jr. drove his car into a crowd of demonstrators against the alt-right, killing Heather Heyer and injuring at least 19 other people.

In a nation so deeply divided and with the kind of organized demonstrations where there are slogans and symbols not seen with such fury since the 1930s and 1940s, we expect leadership, guidance and contextualization from our president. Historian Robert Dallek has observed that “The presidency is a center of moral authority in this country. Every president before Trump thought of it in this way.” One thinks of George Washington, the first president who set the moral and ethical tone of the nation as the Republic began under its new Constitution. One thinks of Abraham Lincoln and the clarity of his Second Inaugural Address when sought to bind up the wounds of the nation after the Civil War: “with malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right.” One thinks of Franklin D. Roosevelt as he led the democratic nations of the world against the evils of fascism in Europe and Japan. Ronald Reagan referred often to America as the moral leader of the world—the proverbial “city on a hill.” George W. Bush gave clarity and comfort during the horrific 9/11 catastrophe. Even Barack Obama provided moral clarity during the horrendous slaughter by a white supremacist in a Charleston, South Carolina church.

Did President Trump provide this kind of moral clarity for the nation as previous presidents? Columnist Peggy Noonan (speech writer for President Reagan) best summarizes President Trump’s failure: “Donald Trump is binding himself down with thick cords of rhetorical inadequacy. People feel let down, angry, and in some cases frightened by his inability to make clear moral distinctions when he addressed the events of Charlottesville. There were neo-Nazis, anti-Semitic chants, white supremacists; a woman killed and many people injured. It’s not hard to figure who and what to be castigated—clearly, unambiguously, immediately.” Only one side was responsible for the killing! To argue, as he did, that there is moral equivalency between the demonstrators on the right and the left is reprehensible!

It was therefore quite instructive that Mitt Romney wrote after President Trump articulated his moral confusion in the lobby of New York’s Trump Tower, “Whether he intended it or not, what he communicated caused racists to rejoice, minorities to weep, and the vast heart of America to mourn . . . Our allies around the world are stunned; America’s ability to help secure a peaceful and prosperous world is diminished. And who would want to come to the aid of a country they perceive as racist if the need ever were to arise, as it did after 9/11?” Romney then pleaded that “He should address the American people, acknowledge that he was wrong, apologize. State forcefully and unequivocally that racists are 100% to blame for the murder and violence in Charlottesville.”

Theologian Albert Mohler was in Berlin when the Charlottesville tragedy occurred. He wrote of Berlin: “This is a city that advertises its tolerance of just about any lifestyle. But for the Nazi

salute—no tolerance. Berlin is determined that the ghosts of the Nazis do not reappear in neo-Nazis . . . Germany is all too aware of where claims of racial supremacy lead . . . We must see claims of racial superiority—and mainly that means claims of white supremacy—as heresy . . . It is a denial of the glory of God in creating humanity—every single human being—in his own image. It is a rejection of God’s glory in creating a humanity of different skin pigmentation. It is a misconstrual of God’s judgment and glory in creating different ethnicities . . . A claim of racial superiority denies our common humanity, our common sinfulness, our common salvation through faith in Christ, and God’s purpose to create a common new humanity in Christ . . . The ideology of racial superiority is an evil anti-gospel that leads to eternal death.”

In my judgment, American evangelical Christians must take on the role of an Old Testament prophet and, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, call our leader to account. An end-justifies-the-means ethic is not an acceptable ethic when it comes to moral leadership. President Trump has the responsibility before God to provide moral leadership by condemning the neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan and all other alt-right organizations as an affront to Almighty God. My prayer is that he will do so.

See “Letter from Berlin: The Lessons of History and the Heresy of Racial Superiority,” at [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com); Maggie Haberman in the *New York Times* (19 August 2017); Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (16 August 2017); Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (19-20 August 2017); Mark Landler in the *New York Times* (17 August 2017); David Brooks in the *New York Times* (15 August 2017); and Sara J. Bloomfield, “Why swastikas in Charlottesville are particularly alarming,” *Washington Post* (22 August 2017).