

Echoes

Over the days since Charlottesville I have listened, watched and reflected on a number of echoes from the past. As the son of an Auschwitz Holocaust survivor, and a boy with early memories of being placed in front of a TV to watch news reports of the trial in Israel of Adolph Eichmann, one of the organizers of the Holocaust, equivocation about hate groups is unacceptable to me.

Charlottesville also echoed for me another swirl of controversy, in 1978 in Skokie Illinois. At the time, there was a great debate about First Amendment questions and whether a group of American Nazis should be permitted to hold a march in the village of Skokie, many of whose citizens were concentration camp survivors. At the time, I worked for Republican Congressman George O'Brien; our Congressional District was not far from Skokie. On April 20, 1978 Congressman O'Brien placed a statement, which I helped draft, into the Congressional record entitled: *What are we learning from Skokie?*

The statement drew on words written by Thomas Jefferson: "if a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." Congressman O'Brien went on to state: "today I feel that our society is ignorant of the many freedoms that it possesses. The people of Skokie are imploring us to value freedom and to remember a time in the all too recent past when much of the world had no freedom from Nazi brutality".

The American Nazis were permitted to march in Skokie but ultimately did not do so because the community chose not to provide the inflammatory environment the Nazis sought, unlike last week's march in Charlottesville. It is clear that 1978 was a different time in our society than today; there were both fewer media platforms, and as a society we were less obsessed with labeling people and issues by a political framing of Blue and Red. Fighting hate groups should be an activity that unifies citizens regardless of political perspective. Preserving our constitutional freedoms and fighting against hate groups and hate speech is totally consistent.

Many years in my life have passed since Skokie to last week's events in Charlottesville and its aftermath. I would observe that often times our business community is a better example to follow than our politicians, regardless of political persuasion. I spent the bulk of my career in companies that worked to create and embrace diversity and a welcoming work environment. Even though that this is a continuing journey for most corporations and organizations, it starts with the CEO setting the tone at the top. Corporations and organizations recognize that our nation is getting more diverse and multicultural and are adjusting to that economic reality and opportunity. I think most would agree that the tone from the top of our country, our President, was far from perfect after Charlottesville. However, the subsequent wall-to-wall negative media coverage approached an obsession on almost every media platform, which only increased the anger and negativity in the country. Perhaps if the media focused more on informing us of the facts of the situation, and not what they believe we should think about the situation, it would lead to a more informed citizenry who could form their own opinions based on the facts.

As citizens, we should turn toward the positive individuals in our communities that emulate the inclusive society that most Americans embrace, and focus less on the shrillness of political environment. Seeking out open dialogue and listening to different perspectives, whether of friends, co-workers, churches, synagogues, fraternal organizations, or bagel or coffee shop acquaintances will do more to educate all, and close our differences. Dialogue, engagement, information and facts may not end hate groups but they will reduce the ignorance Jefferson feared.

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