

Opinion > Columns (/Opinion/Columns/)

Columnist Jay Fleitman: Freedom of speech under assault

By JAY FLEITMAN

Monday, September 04, 2017

Antifa has been in the news. This shadowy group is responsible for much of the mob violence that has occurred during this summer of political unease.

It is hard to know exactly what they represent, but they come to political rallies on the coattails of left-leaning demonstrators, and almost seem to act as the military arm of the left in their pursuit of violence as an instrument of suppression against others who seek to express contrary views.

The name antifa ironically stands for anti-fascist. Every definition of fascism includes in part the forcible suppression of opposition and criticism, and the regimentation of industry and commerce by the state, a fitting description of antifa's actions and beliefs.

Antifa members appear in black clothes, with ski masks and bandanas covering their faces, garb that is reminiscent of the fascist movements and violent communist agitators of the past. Clearly, part of the intent of this costuming is to hide their individual identity from possible arrest and prosecution, and I'm sure it is also meant for purposes of intimidation.

I would not be surprised if the conceit behind the bandanas and ski masks is a romanticized channeling of those past revolutionaries, an impulse not much different from the use of the symbol of the Confederate flag to connote rebellion by a very different demographic.

This group perniciously seeks through violence to suppress free speech and assembly by its political opponents as guaranteed in the First Amendment of the Constitution. I would like to imagine that the political left in the United States finds this group as appalling as those on the right.

However, the silence from the left has been staggering after months of political violence. Only last week did a single Democratic leader publicly condemn the behavior of this group. Then again, Nancy Pelosi, minority leader of the House, condemned antifa only grudgingly. As far as I know, only one liberal-leaning media outlet, the Washington Post, has editorialized negatively about this group.

The U.S. Civil Rights Commission, whose membership is predominantly from the Democratic Party, appropriately forcefully condemned the violence from the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, Virginia, but refused to even comment about the violence of these left-wing thugs. The ACLU, whose foundation is the protection of free speech and civil rights, has remained absent in criticizing this assault on constitutional rights.



The neo-Nazis and white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville are simply a fringe group of morons. Free-speech protection allows them the right to march around and make fools of themselves as long as they are not inciting violence and insurrection. Though the antifa group was given the mantle of heroism through their engagement of violence with the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, most of antifa's violence has been directed at mainstream conservative political rallies and speakers.

The activities of this group are a problem for the Democratic Party. They are clearly associated with left-wing politics, and their efforts to undermine our fundamental political institutions will be linked to the Democrats unless there is a vigorous effort to denounce and disown them.

Freedom of speech is clearly under assault United States. Our universities are epicenters of that effort. Certain words and language are forbidden, ideas that may be offensive to some members of the campus community have become taboo because some feel "unsafe" in the face of contrary opinions. We clearly have seen conservative speakers banned from campus or having their events canceled because they did not conform to the academic political orthodoxy. At times these events were prevented by campus violence.

On Aug. 22, the editorial in the Gazette was gushing in its praise of the 40,000 marchers who showed up in Boston to protest a free speech rally that was to be held on the Boston Common. This mass of counterprotesters "delivered a powerful message that the hate speech spewed by white supremacists will not be tolerated by the vast majority of Americans." The small group who showed up to take part in the free speech rally was easily drowned out by the much larger group which was there to challenge these supposed fascists and Nazis.

The organizer of the free speech rally, John Medlar, all along insisted that his group was not associated with neo-Nazis and white supremacists, but was "intentionally neutral libertarians" whose goal was to protect free speech.

The Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish group that defends civil rights, posted a blog about the free speech rally in Boston stating "significant differences between what happened in Charlottesville and what's scheduled for Boston... unlike Charlottesville, the Boston event, as currently planned, is not a white supremacist gathering."

The keynote speaker at this rally was to be Shiva Ayyadurai, who emigrated from India at the age of 7 to become an MIT-trained engineer, biologist, professor and entrepreneur and who is now running for the U.S. Senate seat held by Elizabeth Warren. He is a libertarian by politics, a strong supporter of free speech, and in no way could be conceived of as a white supremacist or Nazi.

So here was a demonstration in Boston to support free speech which was maligned as a Nazi event, and whose message was crowded out by a huge group sent there by misinformation bordering on hysteria. The editorial page of this newspaper found it simply enthralling that a rally to support free speech was silenced.

The most disheartening part of this whole event was that so few people came to this rally in support of free speech. Perhaps they were intimidated by a fear of the violence that we've seen so often from left-wing gatherings.

How have we come to a place in the United States when standing up for free speech has become a coded message in the minds of those on the left for Nazism and racism?

Jay Fleitman, M.D., of Northampton writes a monthly column. He can be reached at opinion@gazettenet.com.

