

OPINION

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THE RAGE POISONING AMERICA

After Pittsburgh, how to save a country that's lost sight of the public good.

What is going on in this country? Can't we be safe in our homes, in our schools, in our most sacred places? Once again, Americans are left to ask each other these sorts of questions, after a gunman burst into the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh on the Jewish Sabbath and opened fire on families in the contemplation of their faith.

Armed with a semiautomatic rifle and three handguns, he killed 11 people and wounded six more, including four police officers. "Jews must die," he was said to have shouted.

The attack came a day after a man was arrested in Florida for mailing pipe bombs to politicians and journalists across the country. In both cases, the suspects had nourished their animus online, on social media platforms where they could easily connect with people who shared their hatreds.

After the attack on Tree of Life, Rabbi Marvin Hier, the founder and dean of Simon Wiesenthal Center, told The Times, "I'm afraid to say that we may be at the beginning of what has happened to Europe, the consistent anti-Semitic attacks."

"If it is not nipped in the bud," he said, in a remark that should make every American pause and think, "I am afraid the worst is yet to come."

Anti-Semitic claims have acquired new energy online, to the point that Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, recently cited one — that the Holocaust never actually happened — as an example of offensive but good-faith argument on his social-media platform. "I think there are things that different people get wrong," Mr. Zuckerberg said in an interview with the journalist Kara Swisher. "I don't think that they're intentionally getting it wrong." He subsequently clarified that he "absolutely didn't intend to defend the intent of people who deny" that, within living memory, Hitler's Germany killed six million Jews as part of a systematic campaign to kill them all.

Alongside anti-Semitism, anti-black hatred appears to be rising. It has been expressed recently not only in incidents in which white Americans have harassed black Americans for gardening, coming home, swimming, working or campaigning for public office, but in deadly attacks like the one by a bigot who shot two black people at a Kentucky grocery last week, after he tried but failed to enter a black church.

What can be done? Certainly, common-sense gun safety regulation might make attacks like the one on Tree of Life synagogue less deadly — universal background checks, red-flag laws that take guns away from the mentally unstable, bans on high-capacity weapons like the AR-15 rifle that the alleged killer wielded.

Measures like these would help contend with the hardware of hate. It is far harder to disable the software, the ideas that now spread so readily. Though Facebook should do much more to reject the lies and hate of its users, Mr. Zuckerberg is right to bridle at the notion that he should set himself up as the Grand Censor of American or global debate.

"These issues are very challenging," he said after the uproar over his comments about not policing Holocaust denial, "but I believe that often the best way to fight offensive bad speech is with good speech."

Good speech may not be enough in itself, but that doesn't mean that American society couldn't benefit from much more of it today, particularly from its leaders.

So it was reassuring to hear President Trump condemn the attack in Pittsburgh, as he did the pipe bombs. And it was disappointing to see him immediately head back out on the campaign trail, as he did on Saturday, to disparage his opponents and critics all over again.

As a candidate and as president Mr. Trump has failed to consistently, unequivocally reject bigotry, and he has even encouraged violence at some of his rallies. Mr. Trump is also setting a low, coarsening standard for how Americans should speak to and about one another. He has urged his supporters to think of his critics as traitors and enemies. Some Democratic leaders appear to be concluding that they will be suckers if they don't adopt similar smashmouth tactics.

The suspects in Pittsburgh, Florida and Kentucky are responsible for their own actions. Maniacs have always existed in dark crevices of American life, and no amount of public condemnation will ever stop them from developing poisonous ideas. But in this harrowing time, more good speech, from more good people, can remind other Americans of the sorts of values that have, so far, managed to contain the divisions in their country, of the moral imagination and empathy that Mr. Bowers evidently so feared.

The neuroscience of hate speech

Richard A. Friedman

Do politicians' words, the president's especially, matter?

Since he has been in office, President Trump has relentlessly demonized his political opponents as evil and belittled them as stupid. He has called undocumented immigrants animals. His rhetoric has been a powerful contributor to our climate of hate, which is amplified by the right-wing media and virulent online culture.

Of course, it's difficult to prove that incendiary speech is a direct cause of violent acts. But humans are social creatures — including and perhaps

especially the unhinged and misfits among us — who are easily influenced by the rage that is everywhere these days.

Could that explain why just in the past two weeks we have seen the horrifying slaughter of 11 Jews in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, with the man arrested described as a rabid anti-Semite, as well as what the authorities say was the attempted bombing of prominent Trump critics by an ardent Trump supporter?

You don't need to be a psychiatrist to understand that the kind of hate and fear-mongering that is the stock-in-trade of Mr. Trump and his enablers can goad deranged people to action. But psychology and neuroscience can give us some important insights into

the power of powerful people's words.

We know that repeated exposure to hate speech can increase prejudice, as a series of Polish studies confirmed last year. It can also desensitize individuals to verbal aggression, in part because it normalizes what is usually socially condemned behavior.

At the same time, politicians like Mr. Trump who stoke anger and fear in their supporters provoke a surge of stress hormones, like cortisol and norepinephrine, and engage the amy-

dala, the brain center for threat.

One study, for example, that focused on "the processing of danger" showed that threatening language can directly activate the amygdala. This makes it hard for people to dial down their emotions and think before they act.

Mr. Trump has managed to convince his supporters that America is the victim and that we face an existential threat from imagined dangers like the migrant caravan and the "fake, fake disgusting news."

Were the men arrested in the synagogue shootings and bombing attacks listening? Robert Bowers, for example, apparently blamed Jews for helping transport members of the Central American migrant caravan. It seems he did not think the president was going far enough in protecting the country from invaders. "I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered," he wrote online before the murderous rampage. And Cesar Sayoc Jr., accused of mailing bombs to CNN, echoed the president in a tweet: "More lies con job Propaganda bye failing failing CNN garbage."

But you don't have to be this unhinged to be moved to violence by incendiary rhetoric. Just about any of us could be susceptible under the right conditions.

Susan Fiske, a psychologist at Princeton, and colleagues have shown that distrust of an out-group is linked to anger and impulses toward violence. This is particularly true when a society faces economic hardship and people are led to see outsiders as competitors for their jobs.

Mina Cikara, a psychologist at Harvard and a co-author of that study, told me that "when a group is put on the defensive and made to feel threatened, they begin to believe that anything, including violence, is justified."

There is something else that Mr. Trump does to facilitate violence against those he dislikes: He dehumanizes them. "These aren't people," he once said about undocumented immigrants suspected of gang ties. "These are animals."

Research by Dr. Cikara and others shows that when one group feels threatened, it makes it much easier to think about people in another group as less than human and to have little empathy for them — two psychological conditions that are conducive to violence.

A 2011 study by Dr. Fiske and a colleague looked at "social cognition" — the ability to put oneself in someone else's place and recognize "the other as a human being subject to moral treatment."

Subjects in the study were found to be so unempathetic toward drug addicts and homeless people that they found it difficult to imagine how those people thought or felt. Using brain M.R.I., researchers showed that images of members of dehumanized groups failed to activate brain regions implicated in normal social cognition and instead activated the subjects' insula, a region implicated in feelings of disgust.

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Iran sanctions will hurt America

Henry J. Farrell
Abraham L. Newman

During the war on terror, the United States quietly turned the world financial system into a hidden empire. The American government used the power of the dollar and its influence over obscure organizations such as the Swift financial messaging service to monitor what its adversaries and terrorists were doing and, in some cases, to cut entire states, such as North Korea, out of world financial flows.

These policies effectively pressed foreign banks into service as agents of American influence and helped bring states like Iran to the negotiating table.

On Nov. 4, the United States is set to escalate sanctions against Iran as part of its decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal. These sanctions include financial messaging, so the Trump administration could press for Swift, a private cooperative based in Brussels, to disconnect Iranian banks from its network.

Swift is like a global post office for banks, providing a secure messaging system for the vast majority of international transactions, so disconnecting Iran would isolate it almost completely from the global financial system and would have drastic and immediate consequences for the Iranian economy.

If the Trump administration goes ahead with this plan, it will have serious consequences for the United States as well.

It will undermine America's influence over the international financial architecture and diminish its power

over allies and adversaries alike.

Jack Lew, who served as secretary of the Treasury from 2013 to 2017, warned two years ago that other countries might start looking for alternatives to the dollar and organizations like Swift if America takes its financial power for granted.

Germany's foreign minister, Heiko Maas, recently threatened to do just that. In an editorial published in the German financial newspaper Handelsblatt, he proposed that Europe should set up its own international payment channels and its own equivalent of Swift.

Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, partly walked back this proposal, but she too has said that Europe cannot rely on the United States and must "take our fate into our own hands." German and French policymakers are investigating an alternative to Swift and other ways to decouple European banks from American financial markets. The European Union and the United Nations have already set up a special payment system to facilitate trade with Iran.

These baby steps may falter, but they provide a glimpse of what the world would look like if Europe became a competitive global financial power.

One of the promises of globalization was that it would promote peace and stability by creating international economic networks that make countries more dependent on one another. Instead, America has weaponized this interdependence, twisting Swift and the dollar clearing system to strangle its adversaries. Other powers could do the same, or even undermine the United States by building alternative global networks.

That is why the United States needs

European cooperation with its approach to pressuring Iran. The European Union is the one power that could credibly test America's dominance. The E.U. may not have an army, but it does have economic might. And it can use that power to harm American companies and, if pushed far enough, fragment the international financial system.

Over the last two decades, the European Union has built up an impressive body of financial rules and officials to administer them. Recent political turmoil from the Great Recession to the eurozone crisis, has strengthened Europe's regulatory power.

Previously, this power was deployed in concert with the United States, but soon it may be deployed against it. Google and Facebook have already felt the first blows, expressed in the threat of billion-dollar fines by European regulators.

If Europe starts to build its own alternative financial architecture, it will be in reaction to American overreach. The Trump administration has already threatened penalties against European companies if they do business with Iran, and the standoff has revealed the full extent of European exposure to this kind of coercion. President Trump's national security adviser, John R. Bolton, has bluntly warned that Swift needs to ask if it is "worth

the risk" to defy the United States on Iran.

The Treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin, reportedly opposes forcing Swift to implement American sanctions. However, Congress could force Mr. Mnuchin's hand with legislation, proposed by Senator Ted Cruz, that would require the administration to impose sanctions on Swift members.

Sanctioning Swift would be a mistake for the United States. If the European Union can no longer rely on the United States, it will move to further develop its own payment channels. This would take years, but the end result could isolate the United States.

Other countries — not just those in Europe — may prefer to be part of a European-led financial network, one that is backed by a publicly stated commitment to the rule of law, rather than a global financial system dominated by an increasingly unpredictable America. European politicians have long looked with envy at the power of the United States dollar. They now have an opening to position the euro as a viable competitor.

The Trump administration hates being constrained by its allies. What it does not realize is that American economic power depends on the assent of other countries to be part of a financial system led by the United States. Push them too far, and American authority and influence could be permanently undermined.

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