

A Dark Day in Charlottesville

By Don Sutherland

Saturday was a dark day in recent American history. A gathering of ‘white nationalists’ in Charlottesville precipitated violence, a terrorist attack launched by an automobile driver modeled after those carried out in France by ISIS and its sympathizers, and the tragic crash of a police helicopter that claimed the lives of two police officers.

Despite the white nationalists’ claims of an exclusive nature of rights, freedoms, and opportunity on racial grounds, rights, freedoms, and opportunities belong to every person in the United States, not the few. They are not limited based on a person’s race, ethnicity, religion, or any other arbitrary criteria. They belong to both native-born and immigrant Americans, alike.

The Declaration of Independence set forth the basic assumption on which the United States sought its independence from Great Britain. The Declaration proclaimed, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The Constitution enshrined that “self-evident” assumption into law. Its Preamble explained, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish the Constitution for the United States of America.”

The language of both documents is unmistakable even as American society in 1776 when the Declaration of Independence was penned and 1787 when the Constitution was drafted and adopted, still suffered from deep societal defects, grave institutional injustices such as slavery, among other shortcomings. The Declaration referred to “all men” not a handful of persons. It proclaimed their being “created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” In other words, no man, institution, or government could legitimately assert an underlying premise of inherent inequality from birth or justify the infringement of basic rights on expedient political grounds or inherent exclusivity.

The Constitution referred to “the People of the United States” and its underlying purpose to “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity...” Again, it wasn’t dealing with “some people” and securing “the Blessings of Liberty” for that exclusive population and its posterity. Both documents were universal in their scope even as their principles could not yet be applied universally. Everything they offered belonged to all Americans, despite American society’s not yet having the stage where that universal vision could truly be fulfilled.

Substantial hard-won progress, often at enormous sacrifice, has been achieved in the more than two centuries that have passed. The bloody American Civil War brought an end to slavery. The Civil Rights movement toppled the South's "Jim Crow" laws and put the nation on a path that leads closer to equality under the law for all persons. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* created a framework for providing quality education to all Americans and, thus, empowering all Americans to take advantage of their lifetime's opportunities. This progress is remarkable. Nevertheless, the pursuit of human dignity continues. That noble cause must be permitted to proceed.

The white nationalists who descended on Charlottesville like a Biblical plague of locusts want to turn back the great gains that have been made. They want to trivialize the enormous sacrifices undertaken for that progress—from the men who died in the Civil War to the great Civil Rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who were assassinated. They want to divide and balkanize the nation, making it inhospitable for anyone but their ugly movement. Racial polarization would strip the nation of the vitality and dynamism that have made it what it is today, economically, politically, socially, and geopolitically. Racial polarization is a true dead end.

That a small population of backward individuals tried to turn the calendar back to a less satisfactory period cannot erase the extraordinary progress that has been made. It is their movement that is dying and doomed. They now exist only on the fringes of society and they bitterly resent their well-deserved marginalization. Their movement deserves no future and it has no future.

Therefore, despite the violent efforts led by the white nationalists in and around Charlottesville, one must not lose sight of the reality that the United States in particular and human society in general have made much progress in democratizing rights that properly belong to all persons. Even more importantly, one must not be tempted to surrender hope for even greater progress toward the fulfillment of human dignity from Saturday's hateful actions.

Back in 1871, Charles Darwin explained, "Progress has been much more general than retrogression." Saturday's "retrogression" is inconsequential in the face of what has been achieved. If all good persons reject the toxic ideology involved, those events most surely will prove to have become a sort of last gasp "Battle of the Bulge" style death rattle of racists and racialists. The American historical record, with all of the nation's hard-won successes, argues strongly that that retrogression is more likely a temporary setback than an inflection point from which American society will descend into amoral darkness.