

White supremacists hold rallies defending Confederate monuments in Virginia

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A crowd of white supremacists wielding torches rallied at a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia on Saturday to protest its planned removal by the city.

From 1862 to 1865, Lee led the Army of Northern Virginia, the most important formation in the military of the Confederacy, which seceded from the United States in an effort to preserve the institution of slavery.

After the war, Lee, who scored a series of stunning military victories against superior Union forces, was lionized as a hero of the so-called “Lost Cause” by white supremacists and supporters of segregation. Statues of Lee and other Confederate military and political figures were built throughout the South in the aftermath of Reconstruction which ended in 1877 and particularly after the beginning of the Jim Crow system of racial segregation and disenfranchisement of blacks at the last decade of the 19th century.

Media reports of the event made the obvious connection between the torch-wielding crowd, which chanted slogans such as “we will not be replaced,” and the night-time, torch-lit gatherings of the Ku Klux Klan, which carried out savage acts of violence against black people in the decades after the Civil War.

The demonstration lasted only 10 minutes until clashes with counter-demonstrators prompted police to intervene, according to the *Washington Post*.

Among those in attendance, some press reports described him as the protest leader, was the prominent neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, the self-proclaimed founder of the so-called “alt-right” movement. At a similar demonstration held at another park earlier in the day, Spencer declared, “We will not be replaced from this world. Whites have a future. We have a future of power, of beauty, of expression.” The phrase “you will not replace us” was repeated by demonstrators as a

slogan during the night-time protest.

Spencer made national news last year, shortly after the election of Donald Trump, when he gave a speech to a far-right gathering replete with anti-Semitism, stock phrases from Nazi propaganda and calls for the conversion of the United States into a whites-only ethnic enclave. “America was until this past generation a white country designed for ourselves and our posterity. It is our creation, it is our inheritance, and it belongs to us,” Spencer declared. Video surfaced online of Spencer leading his audience in shouts of “Heil Trump! Heil our people! Heil victory,” some of whom responded with Nazi salutes.

Proposals for the removal of Confederate monuments and symbols, which largely began after the 2015 shooting at a black church by young white supremacist Dylan Roof, has become something of a *cause célèbre* among extreme-right circles.

Earlier this month, former Ku Klux Klan grand wizard and gubernatorial candidate David Duke held a rally in New Orleans at Lee Circle, a prominent landmark in the city’s downtown featuring a statue of the Confederate general, in opposition to the plans by Democratic Mayor Mitch Landrieu to remove four prominent Confederate monuments. Protesters, including some carrying assault rifles, have kept vigil around the city’s remaining statues.

The entire local political establishment attempted to distance themselves from this weekend’s protests in Virginia. Charlottesville Mayor Mike Signer, a Democrat, issued a statement calling the demonstration “profoundly ignorant” and declaring that “such intolerance is not welcome here.” Erich Reimer, the chair of the city’s Republican Party, released a statement calling the demonstration “utterly disgusting and beyond words.”

However, the growing assertiveness of white supremacist and fascistic layers is above all the outcome of the shift to the right of the entire political establishment. In particular, President Donald Trump has sought to build the foundations of a new far-right movement.

Before Trump, however, the connections between the Republican Party and far-right groups had long been an open secret. In 2014, it was revealed that Louisiana Republican congressman Steve Scalise had spoken at a white supremacist conference called by Duke. This did not prevent his confirmation as House majority whip, a post which he holds to this day.

In Virginia, which is currently in the midst of a gubernatorial election campaign, Republican candidate Corey Stewart has made opposition to the removal of the monuments a major plank in his campaign, declaring his goal to “defend Virginia’s heritage” and comparing the removal of Confederate statues to the destruction of archaeological sites by ISIS.

Shortly after his election victory, Trump appointed Stephen Bannon, former editor of the alt-right web site Breitbart News, to the post of “chief strategist and senior counsellor,” an important but unofficial position not subject to Senate confirmation, as with regular cabinet members.

Many of Trump’s actions since taking office have been calculated directly to appeal to the extreme right, such as his discriminatory and racist ban on travel from several Muslim-majority countries, originally drafted by Bannon himself, his invocation of “America First” rhetoric and his attacks on immigrants, whom he defames as criminals and scapegoats for the economic distress within the American working class.

Unsurprisingly, many watchdog groups have reported a significant uptick in hate crimes nationwide. The Anti-Defamation League reported last month that “anti-Semitic incidents” have risen 86 percent over last year so far. The Council of American-Islamic Relations reported last November that hate crimes against Muslims jumped by 67 percent in 2016, during the peak of the presidential election campaign.

However, white supremacist and fascistic groups do not enjoy widespread support among the American population as a whole. Both the Charlottesville and New Orleans far-right demonstrations were met with far larger counter-protests. A recent speech by Spencer

at Auburn University in Alabama, nearly canceled by university officials over “security concerns,” likewise was met with large protests.



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