

A Defense of the Charlottesville Counter-Protesters

Chelsey Kivland
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Not all forms of violence are created equal.

On August 12, violence unfolded at a white supremacist “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. [President Trump](#)’s immediate reaction placed equal blame for the violence on the white supremacists and those that protested their rally. “We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence *on many sides—on many sides,*” he said.



Charlottesville “Unite the Right” Rally. Anthony Crider/Flickr [CC BY 2.0](#)

Facing a barrage of public criticism, President Trump then offered a carefully scripted condemnation of white supremacist groups. Yet, when speaking off-the-cuff, he [reverted](#) to his initial, gut-reaction and blamed “[both sides](#).” He justified his assertion through the simple fact that both sides used

violence. “You had a group on one side that was bad. You had a group on the other side that was also very violent,” he said.

Such comments, as many journalists, political pundits, and academics have pointed out, wrongfully draw an equivalence between the white supremacists and those who contested them. I wholeheartedly agree. But an honest acknowledgement and defense of the violence used by the counter-protesters is missing from many of the denunciations of equivalency.

On one level, Trump’s comments seem reasonable. Isn’t any violence still violence? And isn’t it all bad?

However, this monolithic framing of violence fails to grasp how the recognition of violence is a political and moral process. Anthropologists Philippe Bourgois and Nancy Scheper-Hughes **argued** that violence defies easy categorization. “It can be everything and nothing; legitimate or illegitimate; visible or invisible; necessary or useless; senseless and gratuitous or utterly rational and strategic” (2002, 2).

Rather than a monolith, violence is in the eye of the beholder. If and how we perceive violence is necessarily mediated by our socio-economic positions, interpersonal relations, political affiliations, and beliefs about the proper ordering of people and things in the world. This is why evaluating violence is not so much about equating two sides as it is about taking one or the other’s side. Violence is not only a social process but also a moral and political assessment—one in which taking sides is necessary.

As I see it, Trump’s equivalence is wrong, but not because counter-protesters weren’t violent. Rather, they had a right to be. A more robust understanding of the counter-protesters’ tactics—one capable of defeating Trump’s equivalency argument—must look beyond whether or not counter-protesters used violence to the context and purpose of its use. It must ask: How and why did they act violently?

I maintain the counter-protesters’ right to defend themselves, racial minorities under attack, and the yet-unrealized ideal of racial equality.

Two moral-political guideposts are useful in this regard: ***jus in bello*** and ***jus ad bellum***. ***Jus in bello*** asks what the right conduct in conflict is: Was the reaction on scale with the action? Was there collateral damage? In **Charlottesville**, **eyewitnesses** reported that the majority of the counter-protesters—including clergy, students, and local residents—came to Emancipation Park to stage a

civil and peaceful protest. But there were also some—mainly from the **anti-fascist group Antifa**—who physically attacked the white supremacists. Trump seized on the omission of Antifa from news commentary in making his extemporaneous statement: “You had a group on one side that was bad. You had a group on the other side that was also very violent. Nobody wants to say that.”

The Antifa protesters used bats, fists, and dyed liquids, while the white supremacists assault rifles, tear gas, and billy clubs. **Cornell West**, the prominent professor and writer who attended the protest, reported that Antifa members protected him and clergy, forming barricades without which they would have been “**crushed like cockroaches.**” The counter-protesters also did not engage in an attack with the sole purpose of maiming defenseless people. White supremacists and Antifa protesters exchanged punches throughout the day, but **only one protester**, a white supremacist, rammed his car into a crowd and killed Heather Heyer.

While the question of what constitutes right conduct in conflict yields important distinctions, more important is the issue of *jus ad bellum*: What is a just conflict? As an anthropologist of violence working in Haiti, I have learned that there are times when violence is indeed just. When enslaved men and women rose up to end slavery, defeat France, and found an independent Haiti, they acted righteously. Today, the legacy of the Haitian revolution continues to inspire popular protest against the rigid racial and class hierarchy in Haiti.

The political activists among the urban poor with whom I have worked regularly take to the streets to protest electoral exclusions, low-wages, and a neglectful government. During these protests, they often engage in street brawls and property damage, burning cars and breaking windows. They recognize that such tactics are violent, but they argue that they are a response to oppression and a pathway to a more just society. “In front of the violence of misery,” a protest leader once told me, “the violence of the street is the only way.” His comment reminds us that we should evaluate the moral standing of violence not in the abstract but based on the values and context driving it. He underscored how street protest is a reaction to forms of structural violence as well as to the political violence that maintains the unequal social system—such as the government or UN peacekeeping that routinely use **tear gas and firearms** against protesters.

Of course, we don’t need to look to Haiti for this lesson. The principle of *jus ad bellum* applies to the Civil War, the deadliest war in America’s history, on the grounds that it abolished slavery. Likewise, the principle justifies America’s entry into WWII as a means, however violent, to end the Nazism now threatening to return to our soil.



Charlottesville “Unite the Right” Rally. Anthony Crider/Flickr [CC BY 2.0](#)

The same defense applies in Charlottesville. The counter-protesters, [as Antifa historian Mark Bray chronicled](#), believe “after the horrors of chattel slavery and the Holocaust, physical violence against white supremacists is both ethically justifiable and strategically effective.” Although the threat may appear small—about 100 white supremacists gathered at Emancipation Park—Antifa argues that fascism movements in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere also began as small but saw their power grow exponentially when political leaders defended them and the public looked the other way.

In supporting the counter-protests, our task is not to diminish or look past some protesters’ violent tactics, but rather to acknowledge them and ask whether they were justified. Did they have a right to defend Charlotteville’s and, by extension, the United States’ commitment to a future free of a white supremacist value system? The answer is yes.

Let me clear. I am not advocating for violence. I abide by the slogans carried by many counter-protesters calling for **“Peace and Sanity”** and **“Solidarity Trumps Hate.”** In fact, my advice to anti-racists and anti-fascists is to refrain from offensive attacks so as to deny even the semblance of equivalency. The most powerful tool against violence is often its opposite, as it puts in bold relief the inhumanity, cruelty, and viciousness of the violent.

Still, I maintain the counter-protesters’ right to defend themselves, racial minorities under attack, and the yet-unrealized ideal of racial equality. It is important to not lose sight of the fact that the Unite the Right rally was itself an expression of violence. The slogans “White lives matter” and “Jews will not replace us” echoed as attendees carried torches and nooses on grounds where people once

labored as slaves. When Trump insisted that the Unite Rally included “[some very fine people](#),” who were simply protesting the removal of a national monument, he completely disregarded how their symbolism—and the monument itself—constituted threats modeled on past race-based violence.

In Haiti, there is a concept that extends beyond self-defense to incorporate the collective and its moral compass: legitimate defense (*defans legitim*). The notion foregrounds the relational basis of collective violence, arguing that people have a right to defend against not only personal attacks but also the structural and systemic violence that has led to grave inequities of race and class. In my mind, the counter-protesters who protected their fellow protesters and defended the cause of racial equality embraced this ethic to its principled conclusion.

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