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It is not enough to condemn Trump's racism

The nation's ideals are under attack, and it is up to all of us to defend them

Throughout history, demagogues have used state power to target minority communities and political enemies, often culminating in state violence. Today, we face that threat in our own country, where the president of the United States is using the influence of our highest office to mount racist attacks on communities across the land. In recent weeks, he has lashed out unprompted against four freshman Democrats in the House of Representatives: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, and me, from Minnesota.

Last week, as President Trump watched the crowd at one of his rallies chant 'Send her back,' aimed at me and my family, I was reminded of times when such fearmongering was allowed to flourish. I also couldn't help but remember the horrors of civil war in Somalia that my family and I escaped, the America we expected to find and the one we actually experienced.

The president's rally will be a defining moment in American history. It reminds us of the grave stakes of the coming presidential election: that this fight is not merely about policy ideas; it is a fight for the soul of our nation. The ideals at the heart of our founding — equal protection under the law, pluralism, religious liberty — are under attack, and it is up to all of us to defend them.

The story of a refugee

Having survived civil war in my home country as a child, I cherish these values. In Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, I saw grade-school children as young as me holding assault rifles in the streets. I spent four years in a refugee camp in Kenya, where there was no formal schooling or even running water. But my family and I persevered, fortified by our deep solidarity with one another, the compassion of others and the hope of a

better life in the United States.

The America we arrived in was different from the one my grandfather had hoped to find. The land of opportunity he imagined was in fact full of challenges. People identified me in ways that were foreign to me: immigrant, black. I learned that these identities carried stigmas, and I experienced prejudice as a visibly Muslim woman.

But the beauty of this country is not that our democracy is perfect. It's that embedded in our Constitution and democratic institutions are the tools to make it better. It was in the diverse community of Minneapolis — the very community that welcomed me home with open arms after Mr Trump's attacks against me last week — where I learned the true value of democracy. I started attending political caucuses with my grandfather, who cherished democracy as only someone who has experienced its absence could. I soon recognised that the only way to ensure that everyone in my community had a voice was by participating in the democratic process.

America has been a beacon of democratic ideals for the world. If we succumb to the fever of right-wing nationalism, it will have consequences far beyond our borders.

Today, that basic promise is under threat. Our democratic institutions have been weaponised. The Trump administration has sought to restrict people from exercising their voting rights. It has sought to undermine the basic checks and balances of our Constitution by not respecting subpoenas from Congress. And the president has used overtly racist rhetoric to strike fear and division in communities of colour and religious minorities across the country.

The idea — explicitly expressed by this president and enshrined into law by executive order — that people from certain Muslim-majority countries cannot enter this country is not just bad policy; it is a direct threat to liberal democracy. The chants of 'Jews will not replace us,' shouted at a rally in Charlottesville in 2017 by white supremacists, whom this president tacitly accepted, are a direct attack on the values of religious freedom central to the founding of our nation.

Responding with conviction

The reasons for weaponising division are not mysterious. Racial fear prevents Americans from building community with one another — and community is the lifeblood of a functioning democratic society. Throughout our history, racist language has been used to turn American

against American in order to benefit the wealthy elite. Every time Mr Trump attacks refugees is a time that could be spent discussing the president's unwillingness to raise the federal minimum wage for up to 33 million Americans. Every racist attack on four members of Congress is a moment he doesn't have to address why his choice for labour secretary has spent his career defending Wall Street banks and Walmart at the expense of workers. When he is launching attacks on the free press, he isn't talking about why his Environmental Protection Agency just refused to ban a pesticide linked to brain damage in children.

His efforts to pit religious minorities against one another stem from the same playbook. If working Americans are too busy fighting with one another, we will never address the very real and deep problems our country faces — from climate change to soaring inequality to lack of quality affordable health care.

The only way to push back is to be unequivocal about our values. It is not enough to condemn Mr Trump's racism. We must affirmatively confront racist policies — whether the caging of immigrant children at the border or the banning of Muslim immigrants or the allowing of segregation in public housing. It is not enough to condemn the corruption and self-dealing of this administration. We must support policies that unmistakably improve working people's lives, including by strengthening collective bargaining, raising the minimum wage and pursuing a universal jobs guarantee.

The consequences of this fight will not just be felt here at home but around the world. Right-wing nationalism in Hungary, Russia, France, Britain and elsewhere is on the march in ways not seen in decades. America has been a beacon of democratic ideals for the world. If we succumb to the fever of right-wing nationalism, it will have consequences far beyond our borders.

The proudest moments in our history — from the Emancipation Proclamation to the civil rights movement to the struggle against fascism — have come when we fight to protect and expand basic democratic rights. Today, democracy is under attack once again. It's time to respond with the kind of conviction that has made America great before.

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