NORTH AMERICA 18.08.2017 | Thomas Greven

# Trump and white supremacy

## Does Trump crave emotional support from neo-Nazis?

At an impromptu news conference on Tuesday, US president Donald Trump responded to violence at a far-right gathering in Charlottesville, Virginia by blaming "both sides" of the conflict. The marchers were protesting the removal of a statue of General Robert E. Lee – a Confederate army general associated with the slave trade. One of the protestors – a right-wing extremist – drove his car into a crowd of counter-demonstrators, killing one and wounding many others.

By refusing to blame neo-Nazis outright for the violence, Donald Trump essentially put them on a par with the anti-fascists resisting their message of hate. It was only after both Democrats and Republicans called out his attitude that Trump read out a statement condemning right-wing violence. But he still neglected to call it "terrorism".

*By refusing to blame neo-Nazis outright for the violence, Donald Trump essentially put them on a par with the anti-fascists resisting their message of hate.*

Since his election victory, Trump has refused to distance himself from his far-right supporters. His stubborn defence of the ridiculous "birther" movement that claims Obama is not American, his love of conspiracy theories, and his enthusiasm for the far-right website Breitbart speak volumes.

Why is Trump in bed with the far-right? What does he hope to gain from such a repulsive movement? Despite pretences at intellectualism, the so-called alt-right is no more than a hotchpotch of white supremacists. Many of them, including the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), are heavily armed. They are often involved in organised crime and tend not to be active in political parties. They have latched onto Trump because of his promise to "take our country back", as former KKK leader David Duke sees it.

But who is he supposed to take the US back from? Studies predict that by 2042, minority ethnic groups will outnumber whites in the US. The Democrats know this. Africans-Americans, Hispanics and Asians voted

overwhelmingly for Obama in 2008 and 2012. Fear of this voting block that elected a black president mobilised the "alt-right" this time around.

So did Trump need the far-right to win? They were among his most enthusiastic supporters and their readiness to use violence proved useful. On the other hand, Trump's closeness to white supremacists also cost him votes from some moderate Republicans and independents who either didn't vote, or voted Libertarian. Voter profiles are only half the story.

Another possibility is that Trump is himself a white supremacist. He is certainly obsessed with undoing all of President Obama's achievements, and takes the opposite line on almost any given topic. It is hard to say, though, if Trump has any real convictions. With him, everything seems calculated, including his relationship to the truth. Trump and his brand are what counts. He demands unconditional loyalty, but can't be expected to return it.

*Trump thinks he's the saviour: "Only I can fix it". He needs affirmation and gets it from the "alt-right".*

This is why I think a third possibility is likely. The connection to white supremacy is psychologically important for a thin-skinned narcissist such as Trump. He thinks he's the saviour: "Only I can fix it". Trump needs constant affirmation, and gets it from the "alt-right". Perhaps he is reluctant to distance himself from the violence in Charlottesville out of fear the far-right will turn against him for betraying the "white race".

Trump himself does not front "white supremacy", though others in his administration do. But He would gladly practise the authoritarian nationalism of a Putin or an Erdoğan, given the chance. Fortunately the "checks and balances" in the US constitution prevent him – just as they made it impossible for George W. Bush to institute an evangelical theocracy, as many feared he would. Now, however, the country's institutions are beleaguered: Congress is divided along party lines, the judicial system is faltering, and the media are suffering from commercialisation and a loss of confidence.

Serious resistance is building in the Senate and theoretically, the House of Representatives needs just a few deserters to open impeachment procedures. But that will not happen under Republican leadership.

The Democrats have yet to do Trump any serious damage, despite damaging rumours surrounding his relationship with Russia. They are

still raking over their electoral loss, debating whether their own focus on factional interests and political correctness are partly to blame for the "white identity politics" that reared its ugly head in Charlottesville. The Democrat practice of building coalitions with minorities (and whites with college degrees) has certainly left some of the US' white population feeling excluded. The party will need to address these feelings if it's to win over the white working-class.

---



**Thomas Greven**
Berlin

Dr. Thomas Greven is Adjunct Professor of political science ('Privatdozent') at Freie Universität Berlin and an independent author and political consultant. An expert in US politics and foreign policy, he teaches at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies.