

It was unsettling, to say the least, to see a resurrection of America's perennial underbelly marching with torches in mid-July. They revived Hitler's use of torchlight parades by brown-shirted thugs, marching through Germany's streets terrorizing (or inciting) the public. A new generation of young Nazis is out there again, just as the old generation has died off. What are they so angry about?

When this country was founded, only a minority of our population in 1776 supported the rebellion against our British colonial masters. The majority was, at the beginning, indifferent or passively opposed to this venture. But the Founding Fathers, a group of educated, principled, believers in the European Enlightenment, surprised the world by winning. The United States was born, and around the world were supporters (young and longing for freedom) and very hostile elites, kings, and feudal lords, who did not want the model of "participatory democracy" to succeed.

Our new country departed from all previous notions of national identity. We did not depend on blood and soil (the German notion of "folk" and "land.") We asked only that people accept the values of our founding: the shared belief in rule of law, a constitution capable of improving with time, separation of governing powers (courts, congress, president), no established religion, and freedom of speech. These values are what we call "Liberal Democracy," values now accepted by the entire Western Civilization, but rejected by most others.

Of course it was not perfect. Our country failed to address a terrible contradiction to our founding values of freedom and equality: half of the new country engaged in slavery. Those of our ancestors who cared about making our union better shed their own blood in a Civil War in which the other side fought to keep their system of slavery. Although the rebels lost the war, they have continued to fight any way they can against permitting our Black citizens to enjoy the equality required by our Liberal Democracy.

This rear guard action was slowly losing---until now, with the election of a president who does not understand liberal democracy. He rejects the free press as "fake," dislikes judges, and mistakes neo-Nazi marchers for "fine people" who just believe in history (saving the statues of Civil War generals). No other nation in the world honors the losers in a rebellion against the legitimate government as we have done.

Having elected a president who daily demonstrates his unfitness for the role has made an indifferent, passive public, wake up and respond to the danger. Our founding fathers designed a system that could survive a president such as this. They imagined, even in 1779, that a flawed person might some day be elected to the presidency and they made certain that our system could protect us. It is working that way today.

For our liberal democracy to work today, we need to remember once more how much good character matters. John F. Kennedy's Profiles in Courage should be re-read now. Our two political parties need to revisit what they stand for. The Democrats believe that good government can make our country and our lives better; Republicans believe that individual self-reliance and limited government is important. For our system to work, we need both visions, and each must listen to and respect the other. Our present dysfunction can be laid at the gates of those who claim that "government is the problem." Good government is the solution.

The thugs marching with Nazi symbols on their shirts, or those with KuKluxKlan logos, or those who espouse the notion that Christianity is an Aryan idea for white people only, are enemies of Liberal Democracy. They are no different from the Islamist terrorists who equally detest the Enlightenment. They are all anarchists who reject equality, divided powers, and rule of law. They all reject government as we know it and are ready to follow a totalitarian leader. Who could have imagined angry men giving a Nazi salute and shouting "hail Trump?"

We citizens need to defy that enemy and rescue our great experiment in participatory democracy, or risk losing it.