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Trump Needs to Demilitarize His Rhetoric

Anti-Semitism in the U.S. is nothing new. Still, it's shocking to hear coded language—whatever the intention—come from the top.

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Anti-Semitism reared its ugly head this Sabbath in the deadliest attack on Jews in American history. The 46-year-old Robert D. Bowers walked into Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue and opened fire on congregants as he yelled out, "All Jews must die!" Bowers is so far to the right and so addled by hatred that he has refused to support President Donald Trump on the grounds that he is "controlled by Jews."

Speaking to reporters shortly after the shooting, Trump expressed his condolences and said, "You wouldn't think this would be possible in this day and age, but we just don't seem to learn from the past."

But the president can't really be so surprised. He has been warned repeatedly about the dangers of tolerating white nationalism even as he has borrowed language from anti-Semitic propaganda.

When the president has played in this sandbox for political purposes, he has been playing with fire. Although American Jews have never experienced the same level of virulent, state-sanctioned aggression as European Jews have, anti-Semitism has never been absent in this country. Like their analogues abroad, populist American leaders in the 19th century told their followers that Jewish bankers posed a threat to the security of

hardworking Americans. Images of Jews with big noses and crooked faces were commonplace in political cartoons. When more than 1.7 million Eastern European Jews arrived in the country at the turn of the 20th century, they encountered nativist organizations that fought for federal restrictions on immigration.

In perhaps the most famous American anti-Semitic incident of the last century, a mob in 1915 stormed a Georgia prison to seize the Jewish businessman Leo Frank, who had been falsely accused of murdering a 13-year-old Christian girl. They lynched him.

The most famous American anti-Semite may have been the automobile giant Henry Ford, who published a newspaper in the 1920s, *The Dearborn Independent*, that served as an outlet for anti-Semitic propaganda. Ford once wrote that there was a “Jewish plan to control the world, not by territorial acquisition, not by military aggression, not by governmental subjugation, but by control of the machinery of commerce and exchange.” A close second to Ford was the aviator Charles Lindbergh, the spokesman for the America First Committee, which opposed U.S. entry into World War II. Another contender was the wildly popular “radio priest” Father Charles Coughlin, who railed against “world Jewish domination.”

Anti-Semitism manifested itself at every level of society and across the country. In the South, the Ku Klux Klan also targeted Jews as it went after African Americans. Jews “procured” young women to “enhance their own monetary interests,” the Klan stated in the 1920s. In Dorchester, Massachusetts, Irish Catholic gangs in the 1940s roved the streets in “Jew Hunts” that culminated in physical assaults. Even as Jews started to break into certain industries, such as entertainment, in the 1930s and '40s, they confronted tight restrictions that kept them out of law firms, medical professions, universities and colleges, fraternities, hotels, country clubs, and more. One hotel boasted in an advertisement, “No Hebrews or tubercular guests received.” Elite institutions of higher learning such as Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Princeton imposed strict quotas on how many Jews they would admit. The application for Sarah Lawrence College asked, “Has your daughter been brought up to strict Sunday observance?” Like African Americans, Jews were subject to restrictive real-estate covenants that prevented “Hebrews” from living in particular neighborhoods.

Conditions improved after World War II. The horror of the Holocaust made overtly anti-Semitic ideas and policies unacceptable in mainstream U.S. society. The number of Americans who heard “criticism or talk against Jews,” according to the historian Leonard Dinnerstein, declined from 64 percent in 1946 to 12 percent in 1959.

Much of the Jewish community prospered, securing middle-class jobs across a number of industries and settling into the growing suburban communities of postwar America. Jewish synagogues and civic institutions sprouted up in almost every region of the country. Federal and state legislation outlawed residential and employment discrimination. The head of the Anti-Defamation League, Benjamin Epstein, called this era the “golden age” for American Jews. The Jewish community was elated when in 1965 Vatican II adopted a version of the “*Nostra Aetate*,” which rescinded the charge that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus.

But anti-Semitism did not disappear from American life. Anti-Semitic rhetoric was intertwined with anti-communist rhetoric during the Cold War era. The Democratic Congressman John E. Rankin of Mississippi proclaimed that the issue of the era was “Yiddish Communism versus Christian civilization.” Anti-Semitism and racism also went hand in hand. When Rabbi Abraham Heschel joined Martin Luther King Jr. to march for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, he was dismayed to see banners that read: “Koons, Kikes, and Niggers Go Home!”

Anti-Semitism has continued to crop up on the right side of the political spectrum. In 1990, the America First pundit and future presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan blamed Operation Desert Storm on “the Israeli defense ministry and its ‘amen corner’ in the United States.” But anti-Semitism has also stained the left. Just recently, the Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, who has been making hateful comments about Jews since the early 1980s, warned supporters of “Satanic Jews who have infected the whole world with poison and deceit.” On college campuses in particular, criticism of Israel has sometimes veered into anti-Semitism.

But if anti-Semitism in the U.S. is nothing new, it’s still shocking to hear coded language—whatever the intention—come from the very top. Despite having a daughter, a son-in-law, and grandchildren who are Jewish, Trump has dabbled in anti-Semitic rhetoric. In April 2013, seeking to criticize The Daily Show, he tweeted: “I promise you that I’m much smarter than Jonathan Leibowitz—I mean Jon Stewart @TheDailyShow.” As a candidate in 2016, he retweeted messages from anti-Semitic supporters and refused to clearly distance himself from the former KKK Grand Wizard David Duke. He embraced the label of America First, which carries obvious anti-Semitic resonances, and tweeted out a photograph of Hillary Clinton next to a Star of David and in front of piles of money, with text that read: “Most Corrupt Candidate Ever!”

Just days after Trump was warned about the anti-Semitic implications of a speech alleging a globalist conspiracy, his campaign ran an ad showing images of three Jews—the billionaire philanthropist George Soros; the then-chair of the Federal Reserve, Janet Yellen; and Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein. In the voice-over, Trump said, “The establishment has trillions of dollars at stake in this election. For those who control the levers of power in Washington and for the global special interest, they partner with these people that don’t have your good in mind.” That line about “the levers of power,” whatever his intentions, was darkly reminiscent of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

After Trump became president, the situation did not improve. The so-called alt-right, which includes anti-Semitic groups, was pleased to see the head of their preferred platform, Breitbart News, have a seat in the Oval Office through adviser Steve Bannon. In January 2017, the White House’s official message on Holocaust Remembrance Day did not mention Jews or anti-Semitism. The worst moment occurred when Trump refused to come down hard and decisively against the neo-Nazis who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 chanting, “The Jews will not replace us!”

In recent weeks, the president has used Soros—increasingly a boogeyman in anti-Semitic conspiracy circles—as a major foil. During Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh’s contentious confirmation hearings, he tweeted out a message claiming that the opposition to his nominee was being “paid for by Soros and others.”

It’s not just the head of the Republican Party who’s crossing the line. A Republican congressional candidate in Illinois, Arthur Jones, once called the Holocaust an “international extortion racket.” The National Republican Congressional Committee released an ad in Minnesota that depicts Soros as a puppet master, standing over piles of cash, causing social unrest and “owning” Democrat Dan Feehan.

More generally, Trump and the GOP’s hard-line anti-immigration policies plug into a long history of white nationalism. By fanning the flames of one form of hatred, nativist xenophobia, they unintentionally but no less inevitably fan the flames of anti-Semitism as well.

In this environment, it’s no surprise that the number of reported anti-Semitic incidents increased by 57 percent in 2017, according to the Anti-Defamation League. From January to September 2018, 50 anti-Semitic attacks

were reported in Pittsburgh, according to the Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle. Two new studies, one by the Anti-Defamation League and another by the Columbia University professor Jonathan Albright, found that the number of anti-Semitic posts have increased on Instagram and Twitter. One frequent target has been the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, or HIAS, which has been lobbying for the admission of refugees. Connecting the dots between his pathologies, hours before the shooting, Robert D. Bowers posted online: "HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in."

Some segments of the Jewish community have been silent in the face of these developments, perhaps because they believe that the GOP, and Trump in particular, are strong advocates for Israel and of Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

After the massacre in Pittsburgh, Trump suggested that American synagogues hire armed guards with assault weapons. Rather than militarizing prayer, Trump should demilitarize his rhetoric. His language has been a kind of ammunition.