

Introduction—The Charlottesville Protests

What happened in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017?

On the night of Friday, August 11, a group of about one hundred white nationalists marched with torches through the campus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, chanting Nazi slogans and giving the Nazi salute. Police dispersed the crowd after violence broke out between the marchers and a smaller group of counterprotesters.

The following day, hundreds of people participated in a rally in Charlottesville that organizers named “Unite the Right.” They gathered in Emancipation Park to protest the city’s decision to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee, a Confederate general who led the South in the American Civil War.

Many of the protesters belonged to white supremacist and white nationalist groups. These groups promote racist ideas and policies in overt ways. Several displayed swastikas and Confederate flags. Their chants included: “You will not replace us,” “Jews will not replace us,” “white lives matter,” and “blood and soil”—a phrase with roots in Nazi Germany. Counterprotesters gathered as well, chanting “Black lives matter” and “No Trump, no KKK, no fascist USA.”

As clashes between the protesters and counterprotesters increased, the governor declared a state of emergency, and the police and National Guard broke up the protest. The events became deadly when James Alex Fields Jr., a white supremacist, drove his car full speed into a crowd of counterprotesters,

Key Terms

White supremacy—White supremacy is a system of policies and cultural norms based on the racist belief that white people are superior to and should hold more power than people of other racial groups. White supremacy creates and protects a system of unequal advantages for white people across society. People can perpetuate white supremacy without actively or consciously believing in the superiority of white people.

White supremacists—White supremacists are people who actively promote the superiority of white people.

White nationalists—White nationalists are people who want to create a country dominated by white people and the culture of white supremacy.

Nazi—Nazi is a term that refers to members of the National Socialist Party of Germany, also known as the Nazis. The Nazis controlled Germany from 1933-1945, and Adolf Hitler led the party. Hitler believed that Germans were the “master race,” entitled to rule the world. He also believed that Jews were poisoning the blood and culture of the German people. The Nazis drew up plans to annihilate the entire European Jewish population and all others they considered “undesirables” (namely Slavs, Romanians, LGBTQ people, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and mentally and physically disabled people). The Nazis were responsible for murdering twelve million people during World War II—six million of whom were Jewish. The term “neo-Nazi” is used to describe people today who believe in the same or similar ideas as the Nazis.

Anti-Semitism—Anti-Semitism is the hatred of or discrimination toward Jewish people.

Ku Klux Klan (KKK)—The KKK is an organization of local groups that first formed in Southern states after the Civil War with the goal of protecting and furthering white supremacy. The main goal of these groups was to prevent African Americans from gaining political power by keeping white people in political office. The KKK used violence and intimidation to further their goals. KKK groups still exist in various parts of the United States today.

killing thirty-two-year-old Heather Heyer, a counter-protester, and injuring at least nineteen more.

How did people throughout the United States respond?

For many throughout the United States and around the world, images and video footage of the Friday night march and Saturday protest were deeply upsetting. They evoked memories of virulently racist and anti-Semitic moments from history—such as Ku Klux Klan rallies in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and Nazi marches during Hitler’s rule.

“Looking at swastikas, neo-Nazis, hatred of Jews—and not just Jews, but African-Americans and Mexicans and Muslims—it’s really troubling.... To see this prejudice is still here is very troubling.”

—Michael Bornstein, a seventy-seven-year-old Polish Holocaust survivor and New Jersey resident, reflecting on the recent Charlottesville protests in August 2017. Bornstein was liberated from Auschwitz, a Nazi concentration camp, when he was four years old.

Many politicians were quick to condemn the white supremacist protesters. Several labeled James Fields’s attack on the crowd and the resulting death of Heather Heyer as an act of terrorism. In the days following the events, President Trump made a series of statements about the protests. After President Trump addressed the events, the president faced harsh criticism from both Democratic and Repub-



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Protests in Charlottesville, August 12, 2017.

lican officials. They believed that he failed to condemn the white supremacists in strong enough terms, instead blaming both sides for the violence. Additionally, critics questioned why President Trump would not label the killing of Heather Heyer as a terrorist act.

“This shouldn’t be hard. Condemn hate. Condemn neo Nazis and white supremacists. Condemn domestic terrorism. Period.”

—Senator Claire McCaskill (D-Missouri), August 15, 2017



Bob Mical (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

A memorial for Heather Heyer at the site where she was killed by James Alex Fields Jr. on August 12, 2017.

“President Trump took a step backward by again suggesting there is a moral equivalency between the white supremacist, neo-Nazi and KKK members who attended the Charlottesville rally and people like Ms. Heyer. I, along with so many others, do not endorse this moral equivalency.”

—Senator Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina),
August 16, 2017



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A counterprotest at the White House in Washington, D.C. on August 13, 2017. In the wake of the Charlottesville protests, people in cities across the United States and around the world held vigils and counterprotests. For example, about forty thousand people took to the streets of Boston on August 19 to condemn white supremacy, racism, and Nazism.

For many residents of Charlottesville, the protests brought to the surface longstanding tensions and disagreement over how the Confederacy and the history of slavery should be remembered in the city.

“This is the face of supremacy. This is what we deal with every day being African American. And this has always been the reality of Charlottesville. You can’t stand in one corner in this city and not look at the master sitting on top of Monticello [Thomas Jefferson’s plantation]. He looks down on us. He’s looked down on us for God knows how long.”

—Tanisha Hudson, activist in Charlottesville, Virginia, in an interview with *Vice News*, August 13, 2017

How do the events in Charlottesville connect to the broader controversy around Confederate monuments and symbols in the United States?

The events in Charlottesville have reignited a national debate about the role of Confederate monuments in the United States. Most Confederate monuments were built decades after the Civil War—in the 1890s and again in the 1920s. During this time, local gov-

ernments across the South were responding to a rise in African-American political power by passing laws that legalized segregation, excluded African Americans from voting, and allowed lynching to reach its peak.

Today, more than seven hundred Confederate monuments remain in public spaces in the United States, primarily in the South. While some people believe that Confederate monuments should remain in place to celebrate Southern heritage and remember the history of the Civil War, others assert that the monuments glorify a racist and vile period of U.S. history by honoring those who fought a war for slavery.

The debate over Confederate monuments includes not only statues of Confederate soldiers and leaders, but other types of memorials and symbols of the Confederacy as well, such as buildings, schools, and streets named after Confederate leaders. The Confederate flag also remains a controversial symbol.

For example, following the murder of nine African Americans at a church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015 by white supremacist Dylann Roof, many people called for the removal of Confederate symbols from government buildings and other public spaces. Activist Bree Newsome was arrested

after scaling the thirty-foot flagpole on the state capital building and removing the confederate flag on June 27, 2015. Officials raised the flag again and it flew over the capitol building until the South Carolina government finalized a bill to remove it permanently on July 10, 2015.

“For several days, the flag flew above the national and state flags even as the casket of a slain black state representative was paraded through the state capitol....

What united us was a moral calling and a commitment to doing the right thing, recognizing the power we had as individuals coming together to act as one. With awareness of history and belief in a better future, we decided to attack a symbol of systemic racism with a direct action that symbolized its dismantling. We almost immediately settled on removing the flag, both as an act of civil disobedience and as a demonstration of the power people have when we work together.”

—Bree Newsome, in a *Washington Post* editorial, August 18, 2017

The debate over how to address symbols of the Confederacy in the United States is not new. But in the days following the Charlot-



Ryan Patterson, Public Domain.

Protesters in Baltimore, Maryland gather to demand that Confederate monuments be removed, August 13, 2017. Days later, Baltimore Mayor Catherine Pugh had four monuments taken down.

tesville protests, several government officials removed Confederate monuments and markers, from New York to Florida to California. In some places, such as Durham, North Carolina, activists were arrested for pulling down statues.

This debate also extends beyond the monuments themselves. At the heart of the controversy are questions such as: How does the debate over Confederate monuments fit into a broader history of racism in the United States, and how does that history continue to play out today? Who has power to decide how history is remembered in public spaces? How does the process of commemorating the past reflect who is included and excluded in society more broadly? How do we honor complex, traumatic histories in ways that are inclusive and yet avoid replicating injustices from the past?