

## **This Means War: Antisemitism, Fascist Rhetoric, and the Duty of Opposition**

*Dedicated to the memory of Max Levitas*

*1915-2018*

October 29, 2018. The voice of the radio news was loud in the small car. It said eleven people had been killed in Pittsburgh on the previous Saturday, Jews attending their synagogue service. I remember hearing that headline, early in the morning on the way to class, and feeling badly shaken. It wasn't the first mass shooting this year, but Pittsburgh was close to home, only a few hours' drive from my neighborhood. I have family living there, and it was hard not to picture them falling under the bullets. As the dull monotone of the NPR pundit droned on – how did he stay so calm? – more information came out; the man responsible was a white nationalist, who had posted online his belief that “Jews are the children of Satan” and “like to bring invaders in that kill our people”<sup>1</sup>. He committed his atrocity in Squirrel Hill, two blocks from the home of TV's Mister Rogers – murder in the Neighborhood. The contrast between Rogers' message of kindness and acceptance, hugely influential to me as a child, and the shooter's hatred was striking. As I sit down to write this, my reaction is still fresh in my mind. I was saddened, angered, and yes, afraid. But unfortunately, I was not surprised.

After all, there had been plenty of warning signs. In the months leading up to the 2016 Presidential election, antisemitic and anti-immigrant rhetoric began to crop up more and more in public dialogue, especially on the Internet. It became almost impossible to watch a YouTube

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<sup>1</sup> Katie Zezima & Wesley Lowery, “Suspected synagogue shooter appears to have railed against Jews, refugees online”, *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/suspected-synagogue-shooter-appears-to-have-railed-against-jews-refugees-online/2018/10/27/e99dd282-da18-11e8-a10f-b51546b10756\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.39a20c6fef6c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/suspected-synagogue-shooter-appears-to-have-railed-against-jews-refugees-online/2018/10/27/e99dd282-da18-11e8-a10f-b51546b10756_story.html?utm_term=.39a20c6fef6c) .

video about current events, or to read a news article, without finding someone in the comments ranting that Jewish conspiracies were to blame for every imaginable problem. Much of the specific language I will not repeat – the slurs and viciousness have already spread far enough. Immigrants, too, became targets, with the famous campaign pledge to “build the wall” among the mildest proposals. Since then, it has become a cliché to make comparisons between American politics in the Age of Trump, and the feeling of dread during the rise of the Nazi Party. Like many clichés, it endures because it contains some element of truth.

While I had noticed an increase in hate speech generally, the specific threat of modern Nazism first reared its head for me during the violent riots in Charlottesville, Virginia. Like many in my generation, I had thought of the Nazis as a dead threat, something to be learned about in history classes and documentaries. Suddenly, however, they were very much alive, marching openly down the street with swastikas and torches, chanting “Jews will not replace us!”<sup>2</sup>. They called themselves the “alt-right” now, but their message was the same as in Hitler’s time. So was their violent tendency, as they beat protestors with sticks and other makeshift weapons. Soon, I learned they had murdered a woman, crashing a car into the crowd that blocked their path. To my shock – naively – the President was slow to condemn them, speaking only of faults on “both sides”<sup>3</sup>. This was the moment that jolted me out of complacency, and inspired me to research the nature of Fascism and antisemitism. I wanted to understand what was happening to my country, and why. Most of all, I wanted to know what people who value human life and dignity could do about it through word and deed.

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<sup>2</sup> Emma Green, “Why the Charlottesville Marchers were Obsessed with Jews”. *The Atlantic*, August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/nazis-racism-charlottesville/536928/> .

<sup>3</sup> Dan Merica, “Trump says both sides to blame amid Charlottesville backlash”, CNN, last modified August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/15/politics/trump-charlottesville-delay/index.html>

There is, of course, no shortage of books on this subject, and I found Daniel Guerin's *Fascism and Big Business* particularly informative. Guerin presents a brief analysis of how the original Fascist movements arose, and how they operated in Europe, explaining that racial nationalism and xenophobia arise mainly during tough economic times. For the people of Italy and Germany then, and those in America today, it became easier to blame an ethnic "other" for their unemployment and poverty, instead of looking at the real complexities of the financial system and its managers. This was convenient for the wealthy and powerful, who found that the desperation of the working classes could be steered away from their own doorstep, "protecting... financial backers from popular anger"<sup>4</sup>. However, this tendency had disastrous consequences for the minorities who were targeted instead. Guerin's work detailed how "Fascism found in the Jews – under favorable circumstances – a scapegoat", leading directly to a violent fervor against them<sup>5</sup>. Although the circumstances are different, I found this ideology and the language it depends on all too familiar. Simply replace the word "Jews" with "Mexicans", or any minority, and it could be found thriving in the American political landscape.

While the origins of antisemitic hate and violence had become clearer, I was more troubled by their implications for the future. Although events had not yet reached the fever pitch of Weimar Germany, the Charlottesville demonstration showed the roots of the same venom. Nazis were among us once more, literally on the march. Where might they lead, if left unchecked? Again, I turned to Guerin, who had witnessed the rise of Hitler's regime firsthand. He detailed how the Germans, too, developed fears of being "replaced" by other races, seeing the Jews as "some foreign body that [they] must kill or be killed by"<sup>6</sup>. Guerin's observation matches

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1939), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 111.

with terrifying precision the Pittsburgh shooter's declarations that immigrants are "hostile invaders", and that he would not "sit by and watch my people get slaughtered"<sup>7</sup>. My reading became increasingly frightening, as Guerin described how the forces of German antisemitism quickly grew beyond anyone's control, leading ultimately to the Holocaust itself, "the most abominable genocide of all time"<sup>8</sup>.

At this point, I began to feel a certain sense of guilt. I had heard of the Holocaust in high school, and knew vaguely that it was a terrible mass killing of Jews during World War II, but never looked further into the subject. Here, there was an element of cowardice, being unwilling to confront its horrors. I now know that this attitude is not uncommon among young students. The genre writer Harlan Ellison used to tell a story about lecturing in Stonybrook, New York, and being shocked to learn that half his audience had no idea what Dachau was. He called this "cultural illiteracy", and angrily repeated the warning that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"<sup>9</sup>. Today, I cannot help but agree, and feel that everyone has a duty to read and educate themselves about the Holocaust, finding the courage to face it in all its grotesqueness - lest it happen again.

I pursued my overdue education by attending a Holocaust Cantata at my university, where survivors told their stories and performed songs from the camps. There I heard some of the bleakest details of the Nazi regime, and found myself disturbed. I saw the haunted look in the eyes of an elderly Jewish man, as he recalled having his infant son torn away from him by the

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<sup>7</sup> Katie Zezima & Wesley Lowery, "Suspected synagogue shooter appears to have railed against Jews, refugees online", *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/suspected-synagogue-shooter-appears-to-have-railed-against-jews-refugees-online/2018/10/27/e99dd282-da18-11e8-a10f-b51546b10756\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.39a20c6fef6c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/suspected-synagogue-shooter-appears-to-have-railed-against-jews-refugees-online/2018/10/27/e99dd282-da18-11e8-a10f-b51546b10756_story.html?utm_term=.39a20c6fef6c) .

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1939), 111.

<sup>9</sup> Harlan Ellison, "Harlan Ellison's Watching 8", YouTube video, 3:35, August 26, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HphgaZ96-4M>

SS, never to be seen again. That moment, above any other, will stick with me forever. It was on that night that I learned the real, human impact of antisemitism, and began fully to hate it. I feel this opportunity was unique and irreplaceable – no number of books or videos could ever substitute for hearing firsthand that man’s grief, and since most survivors are in their 80s and 90s, they will not be around to bear witness for much longer.

Soon afterward, I became aware that few in the cultural mainstream seemed to be concerned about the rise of Fascist rhetoric, or to consider it a real problem. After Charlottesville, the news cycle simply moved on to the next crisis as if nothing had happened. Some even accepted the framing of “both sides”, placing just as much blame on those who resisted the “Unite the Right” rally as on the Fascists themselves. As an English major, I was drawn to the language they used; words are my trade, and I believe we have a responsibility to use them wisely. To this end, I wish to examine three words in particular: “alt-right”, “problematic”, and “optics”.

Throughout this essay, I have insisted on using the terms “Fascism” and “Nazism” to describe those who center their political practice on other races as the enemy, including the Pittsburgh shooter. This is a deliberate move on my part, acting against the tendency to call such people “alt-right” instead. I feel this is important, since the term “alt-right” was originally coined by white nationalist Richard Spencer, a man also known for shouting “Heil Trump! Heil Victory!” while giving the Nazi salute in November 2016<sup>10</sup>. Its effect is to water down the monstrous nature of what Spencer and others like him truly believe, rendering them more acceptable to the casual viewer. When liberal figures like Hillary Clinton use the Fascists’ own

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Lombroso and Yoni Appelbaum, “Hail Trump!: White Nationalists Salute the President-Elect”. *The Atlantic*, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/richard-spencer-speech-npi/508379/>.

preferred term to describe them<sup>11</sup>, they surrender them far too much conceptual territory, falling into a verbal trap that renders their condemnation all but useless.

The word “problematic” has, to me, become the quickest way of spotting a writer who lacks moral clarity when dealing with issues of bigotry. Often in editorials and online articles, a prejudiced policy or public figure will be described simply as “problematic”, with no further explanation. One recent example comes from the website of *Teen Vogue*, which listed “5 Problematic Things Senator John McCain Has Done During His 35-Year Career in Politics”<sup>12</sup>. Their examples included McCain’s use of a racial slur against the Vietnamese, before saying he will “hate them as long as I live”<sup>13</sup>. While the effort to draw attention to this issue is laudable, the use of “problematic” is not. This usage for the word became popular around 2013, and its appearances have only accelerated more recently. Its effect is to indicate, in some vague sense, that the writer in question knows an injustice or moral wrong exists (allowing them to appear virtuous), but avoid actually confronting the nature of the “problem”. In the face of Pittsburgh and Charlottesville, this word is no longer good enough. I do not use it myself, and believe writers should be wary of it; our readers have a right to expect better. Racial hatred and violent rhetoric are not just “problematic”, they are evil.

The third word is “optics”, and this is by far the most sinister of the three. It was used by the Pittsburgh shooter shortly before he opened fire, saying “Screw your optics, I’m going in”<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Alan Rappeport, “Hillary Clinton Denounces the ‘Alt-Right,’ and the Alt-Right Is Thrilled”, *The New York Times*, August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/27/us/politics/alt-right-reaction.html> .

<sup>12</sup> Robert Newhouse, “5 Problematic Things Senator John McCain Has Done During His 35-Year Career in Politics”. *Teen Vogue*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/5-problematic-things-senator-john-mccain-has-done-during-his-40-year-career-in-politics> .

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Katie Zezima & Wesley Lowery, “Suspected synagogue shooter appears to have railed against Jews, refugees online”, *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/suspected-synagogue-shooter-appears-to-have-railed-against-jews-refugees-online/2018/10/27/e99dd282-da18-11e8-a10f-b51546b10756\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.39a20c6fef6c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/suspected-synagogue-shooter-appears-to-have-railed-against-jews-refugees-online/2018/10/27/e99dd282-da18-11e8-a10f-b51546b10756_story.html?utm_term=.39a20c6fef6c) .

Here, he was referring to the “optics debate” currently prevalent among his subculture. In general, “optics” refers to manipulating public perception of a person or event. In extremist circles, however, this extends to actively misrepresenting one’s beliefs, putting a media-friendly face on hateful intentions. Christopher Cantwell, a neo-Nazi sentenced to seven months in prison for using tear gas against protestors in Charlottesville<sup>15</sup>, wrote a definitive article covering the “optics debate” in March 2018. He summarizes efforts to combat the “prevailing plague of antiracism” in the “Jew media [sic]” by seeming outwardly respectable, while pushing Fascist narratives into the cultural mainstream<sup>16</sup>. Specifically, Cantwell considers various deceptive tactics, suggesting that “to avoid the perception of being violent, we would... need to intentionally lose fights”<sup>17</sup>. The real ugliness of his politics is visible in moments where he refers to his movement as a “right wing meat grinder” that “can, and *must* retake the streets” from the “slings and arrows of the Jew [sic]”<sup>18</sup>. In short, to use “optics” is to lie – and when the mask slips, the brutality of Pittsburgh shows through.

This emphasis on lying stems from the original Nazis, whose propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels famously asserted that “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.”<sup>19</sup> Through my research, I learned that modern Fascists are attempting to do exactly that, from the deception of the name “alt-right”, to the various forms

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<sup>15</sup> Justin Moyer, “‘Crying Nazi’ pleads guilty to assault committed during Charlottesville rally”, *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/crying-nazi-barred-from-virginia-after-pleading-guilty-to-assault-during-charlottesville-rally/2018/07/20/164480a4-8c5f-11e8-81bf-28c7cd96bbc2\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.02c319660f8e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/crying-nazi-barred-from-virginia-after-pleading-guilty-to-assault-during-charlottesville-rally/2018/07/20/164480a4-8c5f-11e8-81bf-28c7cd96bbc2_story.html?utm_term=.02c319660f8e) .

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Cantwell, “The Optics Debate”, *Radical Agenda*, last modified March 21, 2018, <https://christophercantwell.com/2018/03/21/the-optics-debate/> .

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> “Joseph Goebbels on the Big Lie”, *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/joseph-goebbels-on-the-quot-big-lie-quot>

included within “optics”. If successful, it is possible they could attain real political power in America. The twisting of language and perception makes it vital for American writers to oppose their efforts, upholding instead the truth, and exposing the neo-Nazis for what they really are. Ironically, Goebbels himself recognized the importance of this fundamental struggle, admitting that “truth is the mortal enemy of the lie”<sup>20</sup>. Honesty really is the best policy, both morally and tactically – anything else would only play into the Fascists’ hands.

However, I soon found that this commitment to opposition was not reflected in American writers and media figures as they actually exist. Rather than resisting the agenda of the anti-Semites, those with influence over public discussion seemed instead to concentrate on preserving free speech, even at the expense of other values. One of the worst examples of this phenomenon came from the Washington Times, in an editorial titled “Freedom for the speech we hate”. Journalist and former Superior Court Judge Andrew Napolitano described the “Unite the Right” rally in the softest possible terms, saying that the Charlottesville marchers had gathered simply to “state crudely their view that Caucasian people are somehow morally superior”<sup>21</sup>, while devoting one scant line to the murder they committed. This choice alone would be absurd enough, but the bulk of the article was then devoted to sifting through fine points of Constitutional law, arguing that the “heckler’s veto” used by counter-protestors – that is, to stop the progress of the Fascist march – was unconstitutional<sup>22</sup>. This attitude seemed to me completely unconscionable, not to mention missing the point. There is something deeply sick about a culture that values the free speech of a Nazi more than the life of his<sup>23</sup> victim.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Napolitano, “Freedom for the Speech We Hate”, *The Washington Times*, August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/aug/16/charlottesville-shows-why-free-speech-is-important/>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> NB: It’s always a “him”.

After reading the Washington Times article, I was forced to reexamine my ideas of free speech, and how it relates to the very real threat of antisemitism. Napolitano had proposed the old notion of “open, wide, robust debate” as the answer to every ideological problem, while praising the government for its refusal to “take sides”<sup>24</sup>. This matched what I had been taught in civics classes since elementary school, which always emphasized the Constitutional right to speak one’s mind and settle disputes rationally. However, in light of what I have learned since, I would argue that the Judge fails to realize the seriousness of the threat, and I would utterly refute both of his claims.

There can be no free and open debate with Fascists. Historically, the Nazi Party was the single greatest enemy of free speech since the Catholic Inquisition, burning countless works of allegedly “degenerate” art, and murdering intellectuals and other “subversives” by the thousand<sup>25</sup>. If given the chance, their modern counterparts – men like Cantwell and Spencer - would not hesitate to repeat the same atrocities. Equally, the Bill of Rights does *not* protect much of today’s antisemitic rhetoric. None of its protections are unlimited; the Supreme Court has ruled that violent threats are not free speech, and the swastika can be considered little else<sup>26</sup>. For this very reason, its use is banned in Germany<sup>27</sup>. The enemy has no intention to debate freely or honestly; their only goal is to use lies and “optics” to push their murderous agenda on an unsuspecting public. There can be no neutrality when thugs march down American streets with torches in hand – to sit by and do nothing, or to blame “both sides”, is to make clear exactly

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Napolitano, “Freedom for the Speech We Hate”, *The Washington Times*, August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/aug/16/charlottesville-shows-why-free-speech-is-important/> .

<sup>25</sup> “Book Burning”, The United States Holocaust Museum, accessed November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/book-burning> .

<sup>26</sup> *Virginia v. Black*, 538 U.S. 343

<sup>27</sup> “Section 86a: Use of Symbols of Unconstitutional Organizations”, German Law Archive, accessed November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018. <http://www.iuscomp.org/gla/statutes/StGB.htm#86a>

where you stand. As citizens, and as human beings, we can no longer condone the existence of these groups and movements. This is the road that leads to Auschwitz – we must not let it get that far.

As an ethical question, a stance against Fascism is hardly controversial. It may, in fact, be the safest possible position, tantamount to saying “murder is bad”. But what is simple in theory, can often be more difficult in practice, as each individual must question how far they are willing to go. In Charlottesville and elsewhere, some activists have decided that the danger posed by white nationalists justifies a violent response. These “antifascist fighters” or “Antifa” gained prominence in January 2017, when a masked man appeared suddenly and punched Richard Spencer during a media interview<sup>28</sup>. This event sparked a national debate, with countless opinion pieces asking, “Is it okay to punch a Nazi?”<sup>29</sup>. Some, like the Boston Globe, argued that endorsing Antifa would set a dangerous precedent, since “approval of Nazi-punching is likely to lead to escalation of political violence across the board.”<sup>30</sup> Others argued that the “result of creating an uncomfortable culture for Nazis is worth the occasional punch”, with the ends justifying the means<sup>31</sup>. In the wake of Charlottesville, where antifascists clashed with neo-Nazis in the town square, I was forced to consider the difficult moral line they walked.

While some aspects of the violence question were more fraught, I could make one clear determination. The popular argument that using violence against a Nazi makes you “just as bad

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<sup>28</sup> Paul P. Murphy, “White nationalist Richard Spencer punched during interview”, CNN, last modified January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics/white-nationalist-richard-spencer-punched/index.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Liam Stack, “Attack on Alt-Right Leader Has Internet Asking: Is It O.K. to Punch a Nazi?”, *The New York Times*, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/us/politics/richard-spencer-punched-attack.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Cathy Young, “Why You Shouldn’t Punch a Nazi”, *The Boston Globe*, September 23, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2017/09/23/why-you-shouldn-punch-nazi/sjghT8vcvVkpBJWmiOrEqN/story.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Tauriq Moosa, “The ‘Punch a Nazi’ Meme: What are the Ethics of Punching Nazis?”, *The Guardian*, January 31, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/brain-flapping/2017/jan/31/the-punch-a-nazi-meme-what-are-the-ethics-of-punching-nazis>.

as them”, expressed by libertarian pundit Bill Maher, is wrong<sup>32</sup>. While political violence of any kind is obviously undesirable, there is a vast difference between marching under the flag of a genocidal maniac and attempting to defend yourself and your community from the same. To equate the two, or to blame “both sides” indiscriminately, is a false equivalency. The only way to become “as bad as them” would be to adopt their evil ideology. And yet, to attack them in the street does seem like an extreme measure. I was bothered by the ambiguity of the issue, still finding direct conflict to be a step too far.

I soon changed my mind. As always, I turned to further reading, this time on the history of *anti*-fascism. For a History of Britain class, I presented my final project on the notorious “Battle of Cable Street”, which rocked London in 1936. At that time, a Fascist leader named Oswald Mosley had led a march of his “Blackshirt” troops into London’s East End, in a blatant attempt to intimidate the local Jewish population<sup>33</sup>. The parallels to Charlottesville were obvious; much like the “Unite the Right” rally, Mosley’s goal was to dominate public space with a display of his antisemitism. For a brief moment, it had looked very possible that the British Fascists could seize power, much as Hitler and Mussolini’s followers had in their nations.

On the day of Mosley’s march, however, thousands of antifascist protestors poured into Cable Street from all directions, blockading the parade route and confronting the Blackshirts armed with fists and bricks. Although aided by the London police, the Fascists were unable to break through, and forced to turn back<sup>34</sup>. In my paper, I argued that this was the turning point

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<sup>32</sup> Ian Schwartz, “Maher On Free Speech: Doesn't Take Courage To Punch Nazis, No One Being Thrown In Ovens”, RealClearPolitics, last modified September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017, [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2017/09/30/maher\\_on\\_free\\_speech\\_doesnt\\_take\\_courage\\_to\\_be\\_punch\\_nazis\\_no\\_one\\_being\\_thrown\\_in\\_ovens.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2017/09/30/maher_on_free_speech_doesnt_take_courage_to_be_punch_nazis_no_one_being_thrown_in_ovens.html).

<sup>33</sup> Dave Hann, *Physical Resistance: A Hundred Years of Anti-Fascism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

that destroyed Mosley's movement, the humiliation effectively ending his public reputation. Notably, the government and media had little role to play – ordinary citizens, fearing for their lives, had literally beat back the Fascist threat from their doors.

For those grappling with the question of how far to go against the modern “alt-right”, Cable Street proves a valuable example. The people of the East End had no time for vague platitudes about free speech or civility; they saw the threat for what it was, and took steps to eliminate it. I was struck by how little things had changed; again, with the word “Cable Street” changed to “Charlottesville”, the history could be written today. It helped to put a human face to the anonymous, black-clad “Antifa” – most people would do anything to protect their lives and those of their families, and these were no different. I began to see the ethics of punching, or otherwise attacking, a Nazi as similar to those of shooting a burglar in self-defense; regrettable, yes, but not “wrong” to the extent it need be agonized over.

I must confess, however, that this antifascist position did not solidify in my mind until recently, after the events of Pittsburgh. Looking back, I hesitated far too long, guilty of the same moral weakness that leads journalists to hide behind the word “problematic”. These are dangerous waters, ethically and politically, and it is easy to simply avoid the question. But for the Jewish community, and others in the Fascists' crosshairs, the time for ethical hand-wringing is over – this is no longer a debate, but a struggle of life and death. It took the brutal violence of the Pittsburgh shooting for me to fully see that. I listened helplessly as the news detailed how 97-year-old Judah Samet, himself a survivor of the Holocaust, escaped the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue merely because he was four minutes late<sup>35</sup>. The antisemitic hatred that claimed

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<sup>35</sup> Sara Sidner, “I'm alive! He survived the Holocaust, and then the massacre at the synagogue”, CNN, last modified October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/30/us/holocaust-survivor-pittsburgh/index.html>.

his mother in the fires of Auschwitz is the same that took the lives of his friends and neighbors in Pennsylvania<sup>36</sup>. The next shooter – and there will be a next shooter – will likely be motivated by the same evil. It must be utterly extinguished, both through words and actions.

This is not to say that I feel comfortable with the idea of street violence, even now. I am not by nature a violent person, and I very much hope it will not be necessary. As a writer and English major, I agree whole-heartedly with Professor Wiesel’s statement that “Words can sometimes, in moments of grace, attain the quality of deeds”<sup>37</sup>. My weapon of choice will always be the English language, with its ability to inspire empathy and change the hearts and minds of human beings. I believe that by demanding better of our writers and public figures, and being ruthlessly clear in our own writing, we can make a real, material impact against neo-Nazism. Journalists can expose the lies and “optics” of their key figures; satire can strip away their dignity and ability to intimidate, much like Charlie Chaplin once did to Hitler. Vitally, artists of every type can affirm the voices of those the Nazis would silence.

I worry, though, that words will not be enough. Perhaps the rank and file in Charlottesville could be cured, persuaded from their path. There are cases of such things happening, former neo-Nazis working with nonprofits to “disengage” others<sup>38</sup>. People change. But for the ringleaders, the hatred may be ingrained too deeply. If that is the case, they must be stopped, as Malcolm X said, “by any means necessary”<sup>39</sup>. Violence should always be our last resort, when every other tool – social, political, and economic – has failed. But I can no longer

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Heidi Anne Walker, "How And Why I Write: An Interview with Elie Wiesel", *Journal of Education*, Vol. 162 (1980).

<sup>38</sup> Dave Davies, “A Former Neo-Nazi Explains Why Hate Drew Him In — And How He Got Out”, NPR, last modified January 18, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/18/578745514/a-former-neo-nazi-explains-why-hate-drew-him-in-and-how-he-got-out>.

<sup>39</sup> Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), 367.

rule out the possibility that it will become necessary. Hitler once boasted that “Only one thing could have stopped us – if our adversaries had, from the first day, smashed with the utmost brutality the nucleus of our movement”<sup>40</sup>. I worry he may have been right. And I cannot condemn those willing to take desperate measures to prevent another Nazi regime from rising.

All of this adds up to one thing: war. Through their rhetoric and actions, the Fascists have declared war, not just on people of other races, but on human dignity, conscience, and truth itself. If they have their way, there will be no freedom or security for anyone. The wholesale killing of Jews and other minorities is their tacit goal; in Pittsburgh, it was carried out. In response, we must all decide where to draw our lines in the sand – to sit idly by, or to declare war on Nazism and antisemitism in all its forms. Our politicians and media will not do it for us; change, as always, must come from below. We can, if we choose, build a better world. We must, because the alternative is darkness, barbarism, and death - what Orwell described as “a boot stomping on a human face, forever”<sup>41</sup>. But if we can find the courage – the will to fight, rhetorically and, in the last resort, literally – then the people of the future, in all their forms and colors, will find it hard to believe that such a thing as Fascism ever existed.

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<sup>40</sup> Daniel Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1939), 152.

<sup>41</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet Classics, 1977).

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